

HIGHLANDER FOREVER BOOK NINE

A SCOTTISH TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE

REBECCA PRESTON

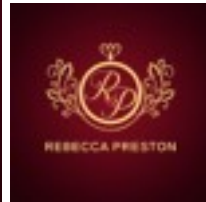
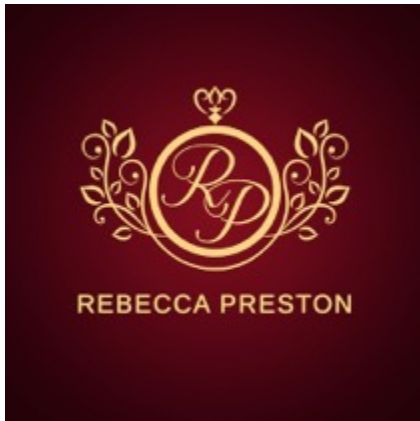
Chased By The Highlander

A Scottish Time Travel Romance-Highlander Forever Book 9

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Contents

VIP Reader Club

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Preview of Highlander Found](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[About Rebecca Preston](#)

[Also by Rebecca Preston](#)

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Chapter 1

Helena Gray gritted her teeth as she picked up her phone. None of this felt real — none of it had felt real for quite some time. She'd been warned, of course, back when she was training that this was a part of the job. When you were a child psychologist, you were simply destined to run into abuse cases — that was just a grim truth of the job. And it was true. She'd had dozens of clients who'd suffered through varying levels of neglect and abuse, and her heart had ached and broken for them every time.

But this was the first time that the abuse in question was threatening her own safety.

It was a Friday afternoon. Usually, she'd be with a patient right now — after school hours were understandably popular in her line of work, and she generally kept her afternoons clear until eight p.m. for appointments. But this week, to her great vexation, she'd had to cancel her whole afternoon. It still didn't feel real — she'd sent the emails canceling the appointments herself, apologizing profusely for the inconvenience, feeling a strange, suspended feeling of guilt twisting at her chest. Was it that it didn't feel real — or she didn't want it to be real? The answer, of course, was that it was both. But like it or not, it was real. Horribly, horribly real.

It had all started a month ago. She'd taken on a new patient — not an unusual occurrence in her line of work when children frequently moved schools, or towns, or countries, leaving spaces in her rather full books. The minute she'd met the little boy, though, she'd sensed that something was wrong... something a lot deeper than the problems he was having getting socialized at school. Six-years-old and cripplingly shy, that had been the description — and sure enough, little Josh had been unwilling to look her in the eye for most of their first session. But she'd met plenty of shy children in her career. Heck, she'd been a shy child herself. And her instincts were well developed enough to know when there was something more going on than simple shyness.

Josh had eventually started talking to her... but it seemed to have been driven more by fear than by anything else, as though his

fear of not talking had simply outweighed his fear of talking. She'd been her usual patient, calm self, not rushing him, encouraging him to feel comfortable with being quiet if he wanted to, even if he just wanted to play with toys all session... but he hadn't believed her. The fear in his big blue eyes when he'd looked up at her, the complete lack of trust... it had needled at her. She'd worried about him when she'd gotten home that night, wondered just what it was he was concealing from her.

And then it had happened. Their fourth session together, without looking at her, he had reached up and unzipped the long-sleeved hoodie he was wearing, pulling it carefully away from his body without making eye contact. It had been all she had been able to do not to gasp. His frail little arms were absolutely covered in dark, mottled bruises, the marks of strong, thick fingers clear against his pale skin. He'd continued to color in the pictures she'd given him with crayons, but the tension in his little body had told her just how significant this revelation was.

She'd waited, keeping herself calm, until he'd left the hoodie off for a while — and while he was pulling it back on, she asked, in the same simple, neutral tone of voice she asked all her questions in, who had grabbed him by the arms. He hadn't looked at her, hadn't given any indication that he'd even heard her. But he was coloring in a picture of a family — a mother, a father, and two little children. And his finger, shaking slightly, came up to tap five times on the picture of the father.

Josh's father had picked him up that afternoon. Helena had kept her face carefully blank and neutral as she came out to hand Josh over. Like so many abusers, he was friendly and jovial; a tall, thick-set man with a bright smile and his son's bright blue eyes. Her eyes flicked down to his hands as he put a friendly arm around Josh's shoulder. She saw his thick, strong fingers and had to fight back the urge to strike him hard in the face. But she kept it together, kept her cool, said goodbye to the two of them... then went directly back into her office to make her report.

It seemed that she wasn't the first one to notice that something was wrong with Josh — along with the report of the bruises she'd seen, it seemed a lot of his teachers had noticed that his behavior had changed considerably when his father had gained full custody of him from his mother, who had her own mental health issues that Josh's father had argued in court, were preventing her from being a

fit mother. It was easy enough for Helena to fill in the blanks — once Josh's mother was no longer there to protect him the abuse had started. Or escalated, more likely... men who hit their children generally started with more subtle forms first.

Thankfully, Josh was removed from his father's care not long after she made her report — she found out via an email from Josh's aunt, who lived in the next state over and had taken custody of the boy to get him as far away from his father as possible. It meant she'd never see her patient again — but it also meant that he was safe, and Helena had gone to bed that night feeling satisfied that she'd helped close an awful chapter of the boy's life. He'd be able to start a new life, now, and to work through his trauma with the help of a good psychologist. She'd been able to forward a list of recommendations to his aunt. Her job done; she'd mentally closed the book on the case.

Then the phone calls had started.

At first, she'd assumed there was just something wrong with the landline in her house. The phone would ring a few times, then stop as soon as she picked it up, with nothing but a dial tone on the other end of the line — it happened maybe six or seven times before she got annoyed with it and disconnected it. All her friends had her mobile, anyway, and she ran her business from her work phone — the only landline calls she ever got were from telemarketers and scammers, or people who'd managed to find her in the phonebook for some reason.

But then the calls had started on her work phone. Once or twice, instead of a dial tone, she heard a few shallow breaths on the other end of the line before whoever it was hung up... and she began to worry, just a little, about what the calls could mean. Was it possible she was being stalked again? There were a few unpleasant men in her past... this behavior reminded her a little of a creepy guy who'd frequented the bar she'd worked at to put herself through college. He'd grown obsessed with her, always asking for her number, wanting to know what time she was finishing work. Finally, the owner of the bar had stepped in and had a few choice words with him, and she'd never seen or heard from him again. Still... the worry was familiar, the slight feeling of being violated.

But she didn't connect the dots between Josh's father and the phone calls until he actually spoke to her one night.

She'd been working late, staying back at the office to finish up

some important paperwork so that the rest of the week would be relatively clear, when her phone had rung. A little confused by the lateness of the call — office hours were very clearly advertised on their website — she'd picked it up on instinct before her heart had sunk. There was the strange, quiet breathing again... and she readied herself to be hung up on again before, to her shock, a voice spoke.

"I'm going to kill you."

That was all — and before she could even gather her wits about her enough to respond, there was a click, and the same old dial-tone was ringing out on the other end of the line. A shudder ran down her spine and she'd packed her things up quickly, the paperwork forgotten in the frightening wake of that quiet, certain male voice. And then she'd driven straight to a police station to report what had been happening.

The police were worried, but not especially helpful. Once she'd explained that the calls had been happening for a week or so, they promised to open a file on the matter. Then they asked if there was anyone who might have a reason to have a grudge against her — and the memory of Josh's father came crashing to the surface of her mind. She'd explained quickly, grimly certain that she'd solved the case, and the look on the officer's face confirmed her suspicions — they'd likely figured out who the culprit was. Still, they couldn't just go charging off to arrest the guy on such circumstantial evidence, could they? It had been an agonizing few days before she'd gotten any more information. They'd done what they could to make her feel safe, of course. There was a police car parked outside her house every night, and it went some way to soothing the worry that was gnawing at her gut. But there were so many moments every day that made her feel vulnerable... driving to work, seeing patients, she could feel the weight of her stalker pressing down on her like lead. What if he was out there? What if the cops weren't looking for five minutes, and that was all it took?

It was Thursday night when she finally made the decision that she needed to prioritize her own health — her mental health as well as her physical health, the former of which had taken a battering over the last few weeks. She'd been calling the police station every night for updates about the case, but to her great dismay they'd told her that Josh's father was nowhere to be found. Even telling her that, it seemed, had been a little more than they'd been supposed to

share... and knowing it made the worry in her gut ten times worse. She couldn't work like this. It wasn't fair on her, and it wasn't fair on her patients. So, she'd cancelled her appointments Friday — and sent a few emails warning that the same thing may happen for her Monday appointments, too. As guilty as she felt letting her patients down, she couldn't help but feel a wash of relief as she cleared her schedule.

Then she called her lawyer.

John was a friend as well as a professional contact — they'd met when she was studying psychology and he'd been doing freelance work at the college she was studying at, and they'd struck up a conversation when he'd noticed the huge heavy book on child psychology that she was poring over in the dining hall and started peppering her with questions about his own daughter, who'd just turned three. They got on well, and they kept in touch even after she'd graduated — she asked his help when she was setting up her own practice as a psychologist, and in exchange had continued to offer advice and support as his daughter got older. He'd been one of the first people she'd called after the threats from Josh's father had started, and he'd already offered to represent her in pressing charges against the guy once the police got hold of him.

"Get out of town," he told her that afternoon, when she'd dialed his number. John was good like that — always quick to jump to a course of action, great at cutting through her usual prevaricating. "You're not working, right, and you're stressed this jerk's gonna find you? Get out of town."

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "What if the police —"

"The police don't need you to stay put, they need to do their jobs and hunt down this creep who's threatening you. You haven't done anything wrong; you don't have to worry about skipping town. You'll probably sleep better if you're far away from anywhere he might find you, right?"

She couldn't help but agree. The idea of being at an address where nobody knew her was incredibly reassuring. Not that she had any reason to believe he knew where she lived... but what if he did? What if he'd found her in the phonebook, or something? Or used the internet to trace her by her home number? No — John was right. She needed to get out of town — at least until this guy was caught.

Maybe she could even think of it as a little vacation. She sure

was due for one... but the circumstances were hardly ideal.

Chapter 2

She talked a little longer with John before hanging up the phone, nodding thoughtfully to herself as she gazed around her house. She'd only drive herself crazy, staying here, thinking about whether or not there was some armed maniac waiting out there to pounce the minute the cops turned their back... speaking of which, it would probably be best to let them know she was going. She spent a few minutes on her phone, checking for hotels in the next town over, and eventually settled on a nice-seeming one with a pool and a beautiful view of the mountains. The drive was only a few hours — far enough to make her feel safe, close enough that she could get home quickly when she got the all-clear from the police. She called to make sure there'd be a room for her — they were more than happy to take a last-minute booking — then took a deep breath, already feeling lighter than she had all week.

It didn't take long to pack her things. She'd never been particularly fussy when it came to clothing — a couple of pairs of jeans and a few tops at this time of year were all she really needed, as well as a few changes of socks and underwear — and her toiletries bag was rather small as well. Her sister Julia always packed a small fortune's worth of hair products when the two of them traveled together — blow-dryer, hair straightener, a hundred different oils and balms and conditioners and shampoos. Julia's hair was her vanity, after all. She'd inherited their mother's deep red hair, and she was always fussing over it, making sure it shone in the sunlight. Helena's hair was strawberry blonde and wispy no matter what she tried to do with it — she'd long since contented herself with a simple ponytail, letting her sea-blue eyes be her vanity... that was, when she could be bothered thinking much about her appearance. All that was important was that her patients felt comfortable around her. And her sweet, round face made sure that was the case — her broad smile, the twinkle of her eyes... and, her taller sister always joked, the fact that she was just about as short as a child helped, too. Five-foot-two wasn't that short, she always protested... but at least she didn't have to bend down too much to

greet her patients.

At any rate, it didn't much matter what she looked like on this particular trip. It wasn't like she was going on one of those singles retreats that Julia was always trying to pressure her into taking part in with her. Julia always had been obsessed with finding the man of her dreams... and Helena quietly thought that was just what had stopped her from finding him. She was more interested in the search than she was in what came afterwards — every time she dated a new man, it seemed they were broken up within the month. Not that Helena was exactly qualified to give romantic advice. The last time she'd dated had been in college.

There just didn't seem to be that many good men out there, did there? Especially right now, when she was literally leaving town to avoid, well not a good man, but a man at any rate... she shook her head as she packed her scant toiletries into her overnight bag and carried it out to the car. It was late afternoon, just approaching peak hour, and she clicked her tongue in exasperation as she realized she was going to hit the worst of the traffic on her way out of town. Oh, well. She had a few podcasts to get caught up on — there were worse things than just hanging out in her air-conditioned car. Like sitting in her house, worried that some murderous maniac was going to throw a brick through her window...

That reminded her. She needed to check in with the police before she left. Helena put her overnight bag on the passenger seat of her car before slamming the door shut and heading over to the car parked across the street, where she knew a rotating cast of cops would be waiting. She didn't recognize the guy who was there today — he was younger than the cops she was used to seeing, and he looked thoroughly bored when she saw him, though he quickly swapped that expression for one of polite friendliness when he saw her approaching the car. She didn't blame him. Sitting outside a little house on a suburban street all day didn't exactly seem like the most exciting posting... she'd be willing to bet he was counting down the minutes until his shift was over. Still — she was so grateful that he was there.

"Just wanting to let you know — I'm heading out of town for the weekend," she told him, feeling a little awkward as she leaned down to the window to make herself heard. "I feel kind of silly just — sitting in my house worrying about this guy, so I thought it might

be good to get away for a bit."

The cop nodded, his expression neutral. "Sounds good. You have a safe trip. Call the station if you need anything."

"You'll let me know, right? If anything — happens?" *If he comes to my house*, was what she wanted to say... but she bit back on the impulse.

"Of course. You'll be kept informed."

She smiled, thanked him, headed back for her car feeling a little dissatisfied. There had been something about his careful, professional demeanour that didn't reassure her that informing her about what was going on would be a priority. All she wanted was to know when the guy got caught so she could stop worrying so damn much. It didn't seem like that much to ask. And when she got into her car, she fought the urge to sigh when her eyes flicked up to her rear vision mirror — sure enough, the cop had already started his engine and was clearly waiting for her to leave.

Well, leave she would. Helena set her podcast playing and pulled out onto the road, feeling her nerves already beginning to settle as she left her quiet little suburban street behind. Nobody knew where she was going — she'd made sure not to tell anyone, even over the phone, exactly where she'd be, though she'd texted her sister that she was going on a trip, and of course it had been John's idea. She had her phone with her if anyone called, and her laptop — the trip might be a good excuse to get caught up on some admin work. There was always admin work. Or, she thought with a guilty little thrill, maybe she'd just get some rest for once.

Nothing made her feel quite as old as the realization that the prospect of getting a good night's sleep filled her with the kind of excitement that she'd once reserved for nights out on the town. Helena shook her head, torn between amusement and dismay. "You're only thirty, Helena," she told herself in the mirror, meeting her own sea-blue eyes. "Maybe try not to be quite such an old woman just yet."

Yes, this had definitely been the right call... traffic or no traffic, she felt better and better as she eased her way out of town. By the time she was hitting the outskirts of town, the traffic was beginning to thin out a little, and she urged the car a little faster. The podcast had been a no-go, in the end. As much as she usually loved true crime, at the moment she wasn't especially interested in hearing stories about men who'd stalked women then murdered them...

though she couldn't possibly imagine why. Instead, she had the radio on, listening to whatever saccharine top 40 pop hits the local DJ's saw fit to play. It was just what she needed to switch her brain off, to encourage herself to relax.

The night crept in as she began to climb the winding mountain roads that would eventually lead her to the next town. Helena was surprised to realize just how tired she was. The week had been no busier than her usual, and she'd had the entire day off work today... but the weight of this matter had clearly been pressing down on her, draining her batteries a lot faster than usual. She spent so much time warning her clients that they needed to take care of themselves, to take lots of breaks and be kind to themselves, make sure they were getting enough rest... at least, she had when her practice had been more teenager oriented. In the last few years, she'd been specializing more and more in much younger children, but for a few years a lot of her clients had been teenagers approaching the end of high school and all the stress of getting into college — and rest had been the most crucial and most difficult subject, the topic of knowing when to take a break, even when the world was stressing you out. Funny, how she could spend years bossing other people around and never quite master the art herself...

As night crept in and she got further and further into the mountains, she started drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, impatient to get to her destination. She was looking forward to getting settled into her room, enjoying the peace and quiet of a new place, maybe watching a movie before she got to sleep, ordering some room service for dinner... then she wrinkled her nose as yet another flash in her rear view mirror distracted her attention. It was the car behind her. There were plenty of cars on the road headed this way, and she had a feeling that the car — the truck, she corrected herself as she glanced into the mirror — had been behind her for quite some time.

Probably annoyed that she was obeying the speed limit, she thought with a roll of her eyes. He really was riding up closer than was strictly safe on these winding country roads, and she resisted the urge to flip him off, instead scanning the road ahead. There'd be an area for her to pull over, and he could go past, and speed to his heart's content. Sure enough, it wasn't long before an overtaking lane appeared, and she headed into the slow lane, even dropping

her speed a little to make it easy for him to pass her.

But to her increasing annoyance, the truck's driver didn't do so. He just stayed right behind her, uncomfortably close, his headlights burning into her rear view mirror and making her squint angrily. Did he have his high beams on? What did this jerk think he was doing? Gritting her teeth, she hit the accelerator hard, a burst of temper making her determined to shake him off this way instead. But he stayed close behind her... and for the first time, a pang of worry hit her. And then, much deeper than worry, dread.

How long had the guy behind her been following her, exactly? An hour or so... or longer? Was it possible he'd been following her all the way from her house? Was it possible... and fear clutched her heart like a white-hot hand when she finally peered into her mirror for long enough to try to make out the face of the man behind the wheel. Sure, he was quite some distance away, and it was hard to make him out in the mirror, especially with the constant flashing and blinking of his lights of him switching the high beams on and off. Still, she realized with a grim certainty who it had to be.

This wasn't just any angry road rager. The man driving the truck behind her was none other than the man the cops had been looking for. The man who'd threatened her — the man who'd put his thick hand on little Josh's fragile shoulder and smiled at her so pleasantly in her office... It had to be him. He was keeping right on her tail, and Helena realized with an eerie clarity that there was absolutely no way she could get away from him now.

What the hell was she going to do?

Chapter 3

Helena felt her mind shift gear into crisis mode. She could feel panic trying to beat down the door to her self-control, and she focused on her breathing, doing her best to control it even as the urge to just freak out and scream became overwhelming. She felt her eyes fill with tears, felt the hot liquid spill down her cheeks and begin to drip from the bottom of her face into her lap... but she kept her hands steady on the steering wheel and her eyes fixed on the road ahead, on her headlights reaching out into the night. Time to weigh up her options, she told herself firmly.

Josh's dad hadn't done anything but follow her for the last — however long. Several hours, by her count... which meant that she wasn't in any immediate danger. His plan might be simply to wait for her to stop the car and get out, and to confront her then... or worse, she thought with a shiver. A man who was on the run from the cops, who'd been caught doing such egregious abuse to his son that he'd no doubt be facing jail time... well, he didn't have a lot to lose, did he? She tried not to think of her true crime podcasts, but it was too late.

Okay. So, stopping the car was absolutely not an option... she could see the speedometer creeping up as she unconsciously accelerated, but the roads were steep and curving, and the night was dark. It wouldn't be very smart to get into a traffic accident right now, would it? So, she slowed a little, dropping back below the speed limit, forcing herself to breathe calm and steady to keep herself under control. Fine. Okay. She was going to keep driving, and this guy was going to keep following her.

But she was going to run out of gas eventually. So where could she go? Where could she pull her car over that would be safe?

The police station, she realized with a dull thud of victory in her chest. That would be the best place. Either take him right to the guys who were going to take him in... or he'd get scared before they reached the place and drive away. Either way, she'd be safe. The passing lane disappeared behind them and they were back on the single-laned road through the mountains. Helena kept herself at the

speed limit as Josh's father drove uncomfortably close to her tail. That was okay, though. They'd be in the next town soon... and she realized with a jolt of dismay that she had no idea where the police station was.

That could be dealt with. It could all be dealt with. She had time... but she knew, deep in her chest, that she needed to figure out where she was going with this guy sooner rather than later. She knew it was dangerous, knew it was a terrible habit, and on any other day of her life she would never in a thousand years have done it... but desperate times called for desperate measures, and with one last glance into her mirror at the truck, she reached down to where her phone was still resting from when she'd turned off the podcast she'd tried and failed to listen to. Thank God she'd been so set on catching up on her true crime stories. If her phone had been in her handbag instead, it would be unreachable, wedged in the backseat.

Carefully, trying to strike a balance between keeping her eyes on the road and manipulating her phone, she opened her maps app and looked up the police station in the next town. To her relief, it was in an easy enough place to find, and a few quick stolen glances confirmed what she'd hoped — it was only a few blocks past the hotel she was navigating to. Right. And holding the phone had given her another idea — an idea that she couldn't help but roll her eyes to think that she hadn't thought of before. Calling the cops. Obviously.

Gritting her teeth, she carefully opened the keypad and typed in 9-1-1, hitting the speaker button as well to make sure that the operator could hear her. Then she glanced into the mirror again... and her heart sank. The truck was damn near on her bumper, it was so extremely close. The lights were so bright in the mirror that it was damn near blinding her.

Fear plunged into her, as well as a healthy dose of regret. Why hadn't she been more careful? What was he going to do? Had he seen her pick up her phone? Was that why he was so close? Had he realized she was dialing the police? As the 9-1-1 operator picked up the phone and she quickly gave them her details, her mind was racing furiously. Her first instinct was hope. Maybe he'd realize what she was doing, he'd grow frightened that the cops were on their way, and he'd drive off, leaving her to finish driving safely to the next town. At this point, she'd take it — as frustrating as it

would be for him to escape capture again, right now she'd do just about anything to be as far away from him as it was possible to get. Even if it meant she didn't get justice. Right now, justice was irrelevant. She just wanted to be safe.

"Ma'am? Are you still with me?"

The 9-1-1 operator's worried tones. Helena realized her eyes were filling with tears again, almost obscuring her vision, and she blinked hard, working to focus on the road even as the panic threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't give up now, couldn't let her fear take over. She'd never been all that good in a crisis, had she? For all the work she'd done counseling children in crisis, she had a tendency to fall apart like a crumble cake when the going got tough... and as much as she chastened herself for that kind of negative self-talk, it was hard to fight it off when it came creeping in at times like this.

She talked the operator through the story, feeling honestly a little insane at how theatrical and intense it all seemed. The vengeful father, stalking her ... it sounded so far-fetched. But the woman on the other end of the phone didn't seem to think so. She was immediately alert to what was happening, taking her through what she was planning to do. Thankfully, Helena had known the name of the road she was driving on, so the 9-1-1 operator had a good sense of exactly where she was. It was just a question of figuring out when she'd come out of the mountains so that a police car could be sent to intercept — that, or she'd simply lead the creep right to the police station.

"You're nearly out of the woods, Helena, okay?" the 9-1-1 operator said, her voice soft and amazingly reassuring.

Helena nodded, a lump in her throat — then coughed hard and agreed verbally, forgetting that the woman couldn't see her.

That was when she felt the first jolt, hard enough to throw her forward into the steering wheel before her seatbelt caught her. For a moment, she was utterly nonplussed as to what had happened — was it possible that she'd hit something? But no — as her eyes flicked back to the mirror that she realized with a sickening lurch what had happened. He'd rear-ended her — accelerated hard and slammed into the back of her car. Her first thought was whether or not her insurance policy covered being attacked by maniacs. Her second thought wasn't a thought so much as it was a scream of fear that ripped itself out of her almost without her permission.

There was worry gripping the voice of the 9-1-1 operator when she sharply asked what was going on — but before Helena could respond, she felt Josh's father ram his truck into the back of her car again. This time it was hard enough to make her skid a little, and she gripped the wheel with white knuckles, wrestling her car back under her control with some difficulty. Panic was drumming hard in her chest, and the sound of the 9-1-1 operator's increasingly strident requests for information about what was happening wasn't helping.

"He's ramming into my car," she said, feeling like she was telling a story about someone who wasn't her, like she was inhabiting a story told around a campfire. The maniac, driving behind the solitary woman on the steep mountain roads, late at night... she gritted her teeth and slammed her foot down onto the accelerator. The faster she went, the less of an impact he'd be able to make by slamming into the back of her car.

Strangely, she couldn't shake the feeling of annoyance about the damage he'd likely done back there. Her brake lights would be trashed, no doubt there'd be some damage to the trunk and to the body itself... weirdly, it helped to focus on the physical damage, to think about the process she'd follow, visiting a mechanic to get it looked at, making the insurance claim phone calls...

Another thud from behind her — harder this time, somehow. She screamed again, horrified, clutching the wheel hard as she fought to stop the scream, to stop herself from just screaming herself hoarse and letting her car crash into the mountainside she was now zooming past at a terrifying speed. Another glance in the mirror, and she realized with mounting horror the positioning of his car on the road. Slowly but surely, he was drifting toward the mountainside they were driving past, his wheels occasionally grinding against the rough stone that lay between the road and the cliffside. A brief burst of wild hope hit her. Maybe he'd crash into the mountainside completely — maybe she'd leave him behind in an explosion of twisted metal and shattered glass, maybe he'd die here on the road and she'd drive into town, safe and sound but with a hell of a story to tell...

Or maybe, she realized with a sick lurch of her stomach, he'd do what he had clearly been planning to do all along. The nose of his car came edging up, despite the frankly dangerous speed she was doing down the winding mountain road... and she saw with grim certainty what he was trying to do. Wedge himself in between her

car and the mountainside... but what could she do? The car he was driving was heavier than hers, more powerful — she felt it scrape against her car and fought to keep control, heart pounding sickly in her chest. Maybe she could slam the brakes on, let him spin past her? No — there simply wasn't enough space. If she stopped hard, his momentum would carry him forward and probably knock her spinning off the road... and down the steep incline on the other side of the road.

All she could do was try to outrun him.

And try she did. Helena had been driving for fifteen years — but that was just about the end of her list of qualifications. Still, she tried to think like a Nascar driver as she took a deep breath and flattened the accelerator to the floor, eyes focused ahead of her on the turns, her phone the furthest thing from her mind even as she vaguely heard the sound of the 9-1-1 operator shouting at her. There was nothing she could do from where she was, try as she might. It was up to Helena to save her own life, now.

She gained some ground, at least, but then she heard his engine whine as he floored his own accelerator, and before too long he was gaining on her. Gaining, gaining... they were screaming down the mountainside now, moving terrifyingly fast, and Helena knew that it wasn't going to be long before she made a mistake that was going to be fatal. There was only one recourse, only one option left to her. It might kill her... but if she kept doing what she was doing, she'd be killed anyway, so what was the harm?

And with one final breath, feeling oddly calm at the eye of the storm, Helena slammed on her brake pedal and hoped like hell for a miracle.

Chapter 4

The first thing she heard was her brakes squealing. The second thing she heard — or rather, felt — was the way her car shuddered as the brakes fought its accumulated momentum. Hands gripping the steering wheel tight, she tried her best to stay the course, feeling the car fighting her, wanting to slide completely out of control on the winding road. And beside her — she saw his truck lurch forward with a horrible scream of metal. She had just enough time to wish that she knew his name so that she could curse it — before she felt the shuddering jolt of impact. He had wrenched his steering wheel to the side at the last moment, bringing his truck swinging over to crash hard into hers.

A guttural scream escaped her, but she barely heard it over the roaring of adrenaline in her ears. The fragile control over the vehicle she'd been clinging to evaporated, and the wheel was all but wrenched from her hands as her car spun out of control, the momentum of impact coupled with its deadly speed to send it spinning across the road. She caught one final glimpse of the road ahead of her, the dotted white line inviting her on — before her car went sailing over the edge of the mountain and into the complete darkness beyond.

And Helena shut her eyes and waited for death to claim her.

Would she still be conscious when the car was engulfed in flames? she wondered. Cars usually exploded when they hit the ground hard enough, right? Hopefully, the impact would kill her outright so she wouldn't have to suffer any longer... maybe she shouldn't have been wearing her seatbelt. The steering wheel felt hard enough to give her a fatal skull injury, or maybe the seatbelt itself would strangle her...

Helena's eyes were squeezed shut hard — she became aware of the sensation with the dizzy, giddy, horrific realization that it might be one of the last things she ever became aware of. But as that thought stretched out further and further, joined steadily by others, she began to wonder if something was ... well, not wrong. Everything was wrong. But something was certainly... strange. Why

hadn't she hit the ground yet? And more to the point — why couldn't she feel the seatbelt against her body anymore? She'd been acutely aware of it for the past — however long the awful car chase had lasted — and though the places where it had pressed against her still felt strange, she couldn't help but think that the belt just wasn't there any longer.

What the hell was going on? She was frightened to open her eyes... but as the time spun out longer and longer, curiosity quickly overcame her fear. Helena braced herself for the sight of the ground rushing up to meet her... and opened her eyes.

What an anticlimax. No imminent death lurching up before her, no trees, no stars... in fact, she might as well have not opened her eyes at all, for all the good it did. Pitch dark, wherever she was... she blinked a few times, noting the difference between having her eyes closed and open to ensure that she hadn't simply gone blind due to stress. High-pressure situations and trauma caused all kinds of strange symptoms, after all — maybe she'd lost her vision. But no — she could see. There was just no light whatsoever to see by.

Was it possible some part of her memory had been removed? It had felt simultaneous, flying over the edge of the cliff in her vehicle and then being here, wherever here was... but as she reached out cautiously with one hand, it became clear that wherever she was, her car was gone. As was anything else she recognized... but she'd start with the car. Her careful exploration revealed no windshield, broken or otherwise, no dashboard, no steering wheel... no seat beneath her. She wasn't even sure she was sitting up anymore actually. It felt a lot more like she was lying on her back, prone... strange, how disoriented she felt with absolutely no light to see by. As though her awareness of her body was governed by sight, not by perception. Helena tried to focus on where her body was on the space. It was a useful mindfulness exercise, even if it didn't help much with her attempt to figure out what the hell was going on. It seemed to calm her breathing a little bit and at least it encouraged her thoughts to untangle some.

But the panic of the car chase was rapidly being replaced with a brand-new kind of panic... one that was a lot more existential than the first. Just where the hell was she? Was it possible that she was in hospital, that the crash had caused some specific kind of blindness? But even as the thought occurred to her, and she put a hand in front of her face in a panic, she realized with a gasp that

there was, in fact, some light in this strange place. Just a little... the tiniest fragment, barely enough to see by, but it seemed to have been steadily growing in strength over the last few minutes. She could make out the back of her hand, and the front when she flipped it over, and from what she could tell from inside of it, her brain seemed more or less intact — this part of it, at least. The image was being processed just fine. She wasn't blind.

So, where the hell was she that was so dark, so strange? And what had happened to the time in between crashing her car and ending up here? Helena frowned, sitting up on her elbows — and groaned as a wave of dizziness washed over her so hard that she blinked her eyes against the stars that had swum across her vision. But to her surprise, they didn't dissipate. Instead, they got stronger, assembling, and swarming around her like fireflies. Helena blinked at them, breathless, not sure if she was hallucinating or seeing something magical... and no longer trusting in her mind's ability to tell the difference.

Maybe she'd just gone mad. Maybe this was some kind of psychotic break in response to the trauma of the crash. That would make sense... and if it was the case, it wouldn't help to tell herself over and over to snap out of it, that what she was seeing wasn't real. It didn't work on patients, and it wouldn't work for her. All she could do was try to be calm and sensible, to focus on whatever it was she was seeing, to be curious and level-headed about what was happening to her.

Well, easier said than done. Especially when the lights kept moving, dancing, and swaying in the darkness as though trying to amuse her. As she watched, they grew closer and closer together, until she realized with a start that they were impossible to distinguish from one another any longer. Where there had been dots, now there were lines... lines that traced the figures of several vaguely humanoid shapes, tall and slender, that seemed to loom above her where she lay. Something about the proportions made it hard to get a gauge of how tall they were, of just how high they loomed above her in the room... at least, she thought it was a room, though if she was honest, she had no idea where the walls were, where the floor began or ended.

The figures. She'd focus on the figures — because figures they were, now, tall, and slender, maybe half a dozen of them if not more. And they were no longer outlined by the line — they were

somehow solid, composed entirely of glowing light, though there was something about them that made her feel like if she reached out to put her hand through them, it would go all the way through, like putting your hand through a sunbeam. But at the same time... something told her not to do that. That it would be rude, somehow.

Ridiculous. These were just — lights, not people. But she stared up at them anyway, holding her breath, feeling the strangest urge to be... what? Respectful? Of hallucinations? Of whatever psychotic experience she was having right now? Or worse... the sobering thought occurred to her that all of this, whatever it might be, may be a hallucination spun by her dying brain, a series of random flashes in her death throes, as the electricity in her mind sputtered and died. That made panic grip at her chest — and as if in response, the tall slender figures moved, the light altering for all the world as though they'd bent down to look at her more closely. And somehow, the panic eased... though the thought didn't. Was she dying? How long did she have? How long had already passed? She'd been on the phone to 9-1-1... maybe they'd find her. Maybe her life could be saved. Her body was probably horribly injured, but she still didn't want to die...

But somehow, the fear was hard to keep focused on. Especially with these ethereal, beautiful figures swaying and almost seeming to dance before her eyes, distracting her, bringing a dazed little smile to her lips. It was almost as though they were singing... though she couldn't hear anything. Not exactly. It was as though there was something on the very edge of hearing, as though someone was playing a song very quietly in the next room, and she had to strain her ears to hear. She strained, harder and harder, fascinated by the tune she couldn't quite make out... and it seemed the most obvious thing in the world to close her eyes to make herself hear better.

And just like that, everything changed. She became abruptly aware of temperature, of a coolness against her skin that hadn't been there before... and at the same time, aware of a strange pressure against her, a movement of air... but not quite air. Not a wind. It was thicker than that, more solid... and her eyes widened in shock as she realized that she wasn't breathing. That what was surrounding her wasn't air... it was water. She was underwater, buffeted by currents, her strawberry-blonde hair floating in the water around her... and as the panic clutched at her chest, she was

just grateful that she wasn't so overwhelmed with shock that she tried to take a breath.

Swim, her instincts told her, gut intuition taking over as she began to kick her legs and thrash her arms. For a few agonizing seconds, it seemed she was getting nowhere, that she'd never reach the surface... the terrifying thought occurred to her that she might be swimming down, not up, but what could she do about that? What could she do about any of this? How the hell had she gotten into water? None of that mattered, right now — all that mattered was getting her face to a place where she could gasp some air in.

And what felt like hours but must only have been seconds later, Helena's head broke the surface of the water and she drew the sweetest, coldest breath of air she'd ever experienced in her life.

Such was the force of her relief that she simply floated there, enjoying the sheer delight of breathing, for several minutes before a single thought seemed to see fit to creep back into her mind. And that thought was — how long can I tread water before I run out of energy? She blinked hard, finally pulled from her strange reverie, looking around her with panic making its steady way back to the forefront of her consciousness. Where the hell was she? What was this place? And if she was in the water — which it seemed she was, judging by the waves slapping against the back of her head as she paddled to keep her head above the water — then where was the shore?

It was freezing, that was the second thought that hit her, and that was accompanied by a jolt of real fear. Hypothermia could set in terrifyingly quickly when a person got cold — especially when that cold was accompanied by shock, which she certainly fit the bill for. Get moving, that was the way. Get moving, find land, get warm. Gritting her teeth, she kicked her legs and thrashed her arms. She'd never been an especially graceful swimmer, but the effort began to warm her as she made her way through....

Through what, exactly? It was pitch dark, with only the occasional glimmer of starlight breaking through the thick clouds above her. She was outdoors, that was just about all she could figure out... and it was night time, still. Her body was intact — she felt strong enough and pain-free, despite the cold and discomfort of her immersion in whatever body of water she was struggling through. So, what the hell had happened? She'd crashed her car, hadn't she? Or had she dreamed that?

It didn't matter, did it? Not if she drowned. Helena gritted her teeth and recommitted to the effort. First, she'd get to shore. Then she'd figure out just what the hell was going on here.

Chapter 5

But it wasn't long before panic started to grip her. It was impossible to tell how far she'd come, how far she still had to go... she could see something in the distance, but she couldn't figure out how far away it was. Some lights, very distant, glinting a little off the water... and not clear enough by far for her to be sure they were actually there, and not just hopeful hallucinations of her panicky, traumatized mind. She swam toward them anyway, though, breathing hard as she tried to remember her high school swimming classes. Which one was the most efficient? She opted for a strange kind of crawl, the one she saw most often when she happened to flick over to a swimming competition on TV. Who'd have thought that that would be vital research, someday?

But she wasn't a competitive swimmer. She was barely a swimmer at all, and it wasn't long before she could feel the cramps beginning to take hold, creeping into her legs, making her gasp and wince as the pain worked its way up and down her body. This could be dire, she knew, the worry making her tense up even more and worsening the cramps. If her muscles cramped up too much, she'd sink like a stone... and that would make the 'miraculously survived a car wreck' point kind of moot, wouldn't it?

And then, something reached her ears that seemed out of place. Something that wasn't just the sloshing of the waves, or the panicked rasping of her own breathing, or the splash of her hands through the water. Something that sounded for all the world like hoofbeats, slow and steady, some way in the interminable distance... and if she was hallucinating, right now she was too exhausted to care. She lifted her head from the water and shouted for help, frightened by how weak her voice sounded. Then she cleared her throat and tried again, stronger this time, clearer, trying to use the panic to strengthen her voice.

"Help! Someone! Please — help!"

She kept swimming, desperate, breathing hard, hoping that the heat generated by the exercise would go some way to calming the shivering that had also taken over her limbs. There was shouting

coming back from the distance, and her eyes widened as she realized the voice wasn't nearly as far away as she thought. Was it wishful thinking, or was that a figure she could see, outlined in the distance? If that was a figure — if that was the man who was shouting at her — why, then she wasn't far from the shore at all! Relief and giddy terror gripped at her and she felt herself sob a little as she redoubled her pace, arms and legs thrashing. But the cramping, the exhaustion... it was getting to her. She wasn't moving fast enough. She could feel herself floundering, sinking into the waves, screaming for help as the water began to slosh over her face. She was just so tired... it seemed impossible to stay up, impossible to fight the irresistible tug of gravity, even as she thrashed with all her strength against the current... all she could hear was splashing. Her own limbs, splashing... so loud. So disruptive. Wouldn't the quiet be nice, once she'd sunk below the waves —?

The splashing got louder, and just as she realized dizzily that it hadn't been her limbs making all the commotion after all, she felt something grab her hard around the midsection and yank her forward, hard. Choking and spluttering, she felt herself being dragged forward, her head held just above the surface of the water as — yes, it was an arm that had looped around her shoulders, a strong, warm arm wrapped in some kind of rough fabric. Almost weeping with relief, she kicked her legs, hoping to help in some small way as her rescuer dragged her through the water... and before too long, she felt him nudge at her, and realized with a rush of relief that her feet could reach the bottom.

Helena put her feet down on the rocky ground that lay beneath the water, almost sobbing with relief as she began to trudge, still half-supported by her rescuer, steadily out of the depths and into the shallows. As she walked, she felt the water dripping from her clothing, her jacket drenched and clinging tight to her shoulders, the T-shirt beneath it offering precious little shelter from the freezing air, colder still than the water she'd been immersed in. Thank God for the warm shape of the man beside her, who still had an arm around her waist as he supported her through the water, taking more and more of her weight as they left the water...

And then, thank God, she found herself on solid ground, the last of the waves behind her. And she could turn, still breathing hard, barely steady on her feet, to look up into his face — quite a way up, she thought dazedly, her neck tilting back... and back... and back.

She was a short woman, it was true, but even accounting for that natural difference, this was an incredibly tall man. He was breathing hard, too, staring down at her wild-eyed, and she felt a strange jolt of surprise at the look of vivid fear on his face. It was still pitch dark, the night sky stretched out above them... but there was a flickering light that was letting them look at each other, spilling out of what she realized to her surprise was an old-fashioned lantern sitting on the shore.

"Strange time of night for a swim, lass," the man said finally, breathless, his tone betraying his worry and shock... but also drawing a surprising smile to her lips with the tilt of humor in it.

"I don't —" she started, then bent over and coughed, feeling her voice catching and rasping in her throat. She must have inhaled more water than she'd thought when her head had dropped below the surface of the water there, just for a moment... breathing hard, she straightened, trying to keep her mind from spiraling off into complete shock. "I don't know how I got there. I was — I was driving, and then I was — how did I get into the ocean?"

The man raised an eyebrow. By the lamplight, she could tell he was about her age, maybe a few years older. He had a narrow face and wide, gray eyes that were still fixed on her face, wary, taking her in — checking her over, she realized with mild exasperation. Trying to see if she was completely insane. Well, fair enough, too. She'd be worried about the mental wellbeing of someone she'd just pulled out of the sea, too. "The ocean, lass? That's the Loch."

She finally connected the dots between his lilting vowels. "You're Scottish."

A snort of laughter. "Aye, you caught me. You're not," he said softly, looking at her with keen interest in those gray eyes. His hair, she realized with surprise, was braided — dark red, kept neatly back behind his ears by the braids. It must have been long, to be braided like that. How strange. A Scotsman with braided hair. "My name is Duncan Grant," he said now, as if her scrutiny was a prompt for an introduction.

"Helena Gray," she said automatically in response, going to reach out to shake his hand — before realizing that both of his hands were still on her waist, steadying her, keeping her from falling. They shared an awkward little laugh... before Helena's eyes drifted over toward the lantern. Because behind it was the answer to another little mystery — an enormous, dark shape that revealed

itself to be a sweet-faced horse, lipping idly at the grass that grew by the shore even as it studied them both carefully through one dark eye. "You're out riding? In the middle of the night?"

"Traveling home," Duncan said briskly. "But I think I'd best stay here, for a little while. You'll catch your death of that chill if we don't do something about it."

And with that, he all but scooped her into his arms, steering her firmly away from the water's edge and toward the grass that lay just beyond the rocky, sandy shore. It wasn't long before he'd settled her down on a rock and draped what seemed to be some kind of enormous blanket around her shoulders. It had been on the horse's back, and it smelled strongly of horse hair, but in the chill of this night, Helena wasn't going to get picky. Duncan worked quickly — she realized rapidly that he was building a fire, and she sat back to watch with a mixture of surprise and awe. Not many men these days knew how to light a fire, did they? It wasn't long before the little blaze was crackling merrily away, and she was surprised by the way the heat of it chased away a little of the chill of the night. What time was it, anyway? Duncan didn't seem to be wearing a watch... and honestly, the more she looked at him and his strange clothing, the more confused she felt. He looked like he was dressed up for a medieval re-enactment, or something — and the horse was adding to the effect.

"I'll keep stoking it, but that'll do for now," Duncan said firmly. "Now. Those wet clothes will need to come off."

Helena blanched, looking at him blankly, and he sighed.

"I'll turn around, of course. But you'll catch your death if you stay in those soaking wet pieces of cloth. They'll freeze straight to your skin."

As promised, he turned around, sitting cross-legged with his back to the fire and an expectant attitude clear in his body. With a grimace, Helena shifted the thick horse blanket that Duncan had draped around her shoulders when she'd emerged from the lake and let it fall to the ground around her. Then she peeled her wet jacket from her shoulders, grimacing at the unpleasant sensation. One quick glance at Duncan whose back remained firmly turned, and she kicked off her boots and dragged her leggings off her legs, shivering a little as the chill air hit her still-damp skin. Then she pulled her T-shirt over her head, too... before hesitating when it came to her underwear.

"Can I turn —"

"No!" she said quickly, feeling a blush rise to her cheeks. God, when was the last time she'd been naked around a man? The thought entered her head unbidden and she fought back a laugh. Being yanked out of a lake on the verge of drowning wasn't exactly a cute way to meet, was it? Shaking her head, she turned back to grab the horse blanket — but then Duncan cleared his throat and waved at her with one arm.

"If you'd like my cloak? Might be better than the horse blanket."

He gestured at a piece of cloth that had been draped over a nearby rock, and she murmured thanks as she collected it. It wasn't exactly velvet — the fabric was coarse and caught a little on her soft hands — but he was right, it was a great deal less coarse than the horse blanket. Smelled better, too. A little like horse... but also a little like sweat, the undeniable and definitely not unpleasant musk of a man... she felt the blush return to her cheeks and shook her head as she tugged the cloak tight around her shoulders, returning to perch on the rock. It was long enough to cover her down to the knees, and when she tucked her feet in underneath her, she felt like a toasty warm little burrito.

"I'm decent," she said finally.

Duncan turned around, flicking her a quick little smile as he did. Then he got to his feet and collected her discarded clothing, laying it down on the rock closest to the fire, carefully adjusting it so that it would dry as quickly as possible. Feeling a little embarrassed that she hadn't thought of doing that — but not wanting to risk revealing her skin in the attempt to help him — Helena returned her gaze to the fire, breathing peacefully and enjoying the sensation of not being just about to drown in a lake.

Of course, there were new questions that began to bubble up as the panic of her near-death experience faded... and for the life of her, she couldn't decide which ones to ask first. Thankfully, Duncan saved her — again, she thought with a grimace. He looked up at her once he'd returned to his seat by the fire, raising an eyebrow at her across the flames.

"So, Helena Gray. Just where did you come from?"

Chapter 6

She couldn't stop herself from barking laughter. "God, that's the question of the hour, isn't it? From — up, I think." She gestured skyward... but as she did, she couldn't help but frown. "Where are the mountains?" Duncan looked nonplussed, and she felt herself growing impatient. "I was driving through the mountains, and then — well, it's a long story."

"No mountains here, lass. Not close, at any rate. There's mountains to the south east, but otherwise Loch Ness is —"

"Loch what?"

"Loch Ness."

She'd have assumed he was making a joke about his own accent, maybe, but he looked deadly serious. "What are you talking about?"

He looked at her blankly. "The body of water I just pulled you out of."

"Like the one in Scotland?" She blinked, feeling a little thrown. True enough, she wasn't especially educated about the landscape that lay around her city — she couldn't have named the mountains she'd been driving through even though she'd been looking at maps for days as she planned her ill-fated weekend away — but Loch Ness? She felt sure she'd have noticed if there'd been a lake with such a distinctive name nearby. But there was something about Duncan's expression that made her feel like she was missing something.

"Aye, lass," he said softly. Was that pity on his face? Sympathy? What was going on? "But not like the one in Scotland. The very one itself."

She looked at him for a long moment, deciding between annoyance, exasperation, and amusement. And then a shiver ripped through her body, distracting her thoroughly, and she winced with dismay, tugging the cloak tighter around herself. Duncan made an exasperated sound and got to his feet, moving to sit beside her, and taking her hands into his with a firm, practical deftness that short-circuited any protest she might have offered. His hands were warm, and softer than she'd have thought, though she could feel the rough

catch of callouses there too... she peered at him, lost for words, as he briskly rubbed them between his own hands, and slowly but surely, she felt warmth coming back into her fingertips.

"Fire'll do its work soon enough," he said, and she wondered if he was avoiding eye contact for any particular reason. "But until then, if you don't want to lose your fingers from the chill —"

"What did you mean?" she asked softly, her mind refusing to let go of the sentence it was still chewing on. "About this being Loch Ness?"

"Exactly what I said, lass. That's it. You're in Scotland, that's Loch Ness... I think the actual sticking point for you is *how* you got here."

"Guess so," she said faintly, feeling a wave of dizziness wash over her that the warmth of Duncan's hands didn't do much to dispel. "I mean, I'm pretty obviously dreaming, so I'm not too worried about it..."

Duncan clicked his tongue as he kept rubbing her hands. "Not true, I'm afraid. Comforting, I don't doubt, but comforting lies are rarely comforting for long."

Ominous, she thought resentfully, taking her hands back and putting them back in her lap. She didn't like ominous, from her dreams. Why couldn't this be one of those dreams where she could fly? Not that it was an especially nice night for flying... she didn't usually feel so cold in her dreams... God, she was getting delirious. Duncan was still looking at her with a wondering expression on his face, as though she was something miraculous. "What?"

"It's just... strange. Never thought I'd meet one of you in the flesh."

"One of what?" she said irritably. "A woman?"

That drew a chuckle from him — it was a lovely sound, merry and melodious, and she felt it warm a part of her chest that hadn't been warm for quite some time... in a way that had very little to do with the chill of the lake. "Aye, that's true enough," he acknowledged with a shrug. "Precious little time for companionship when you're on the road all day."

"On the road, huh? Riding a horse around? Some kind of — medieval re-enactor?" She'd known people in that line of work — people who dressed up as historical figures, often for educational purposes, sometimes just for fun. It was strange, sure, that he was still in his costume this late at night — but that was far from the

only strange thing that was happening to her right now. And as much as she wanted to believe she was dreaming, an irritating part of her mind seemed determined to find some kind of logic to the situation. And right now, medieval re-enactor was the most logical explanation she could imagine.

But Duncan was shaking his head. "I'm a courier, of sorts. I bring messages between the Keep and the people in the villages, sometimes the guard posts that lie a fair distance from the Loch."

"Right," she said drily. "Okay. You can drop the act, dude. I'd really appreciate it actually. I've had — I've had a weekend like you would not believe, and I could really just use a normal conversation, so — can you stop, with all the stuff about me being in Scotland and you being some... medieval... whatever? The costume's cool, I just —"

"It's not a costume, lass," Duncan said with a shake of his head. "I know what you must think, but these are modern clothes."

"Oh, so I've traveled through time as well as to Scotland, is that it?" she said drily with a roll of her eyes. "That was some car accident."

"I know it sounds absurd," Duncan said softly, and there was something about the look on his face that made the wry smile fade from her own. "I can't say I understand it especially well myself, lassie. All I know is that Castle Urquhart is home to a whole host of women just like you. Women who've come through from some other time, some other place... women with strange accents like yours, women with strange knowledge of all kinds of things. Women who give us a hell of a reputation for witchcraft," he added drily.

Helena stared at him for a long moment, willing the anger in her chest to subside. Was he messing with her? There was something about the way he spoke; about his casual, easy body language as he calmly told her that she'd traveled from some other time to this place — and what the hell had he been saying about a castle? "You are telling me I've somehow fallen through time and space to end up in — what, ancient Scotland?"

"It's the end of the sixteenth century, aye."

"Great. Sure. And I'm supposed to just — believe that?"

Duncan shrugged his broad shoulders. He was lucky he was so good-looking, she thought sourly. A less handsome man would be getting a tongue-lashing from her right about now. But there was

something about his face that made her want to believe him... as completely ridiculous as what he was telling her was.

"You don't have to believe me," he said softly. "But it's true. Sooner or later, living here will convince you of that."

"I don't live here," she said blankly. "I live in — I live back —" She realized she was pointing to the lake as she brought her little home to mind, thought, with a sudden wrench of homesickness, of her bed, her kitchen, her comfortable couch... God, what she wouldn't give to be back there. It had been stupid, leaving town. If she hadn't left town, none of this would have happened. "How do I get home?" she whispered, fighting back the urge to collapse into a fit of tears. That would be just perfect, wouldn't it? Really put a good cap on the evening.

"I'm no expert, lass, I'm sorry," Duncan admitted, shaking his head. "But I'll tell you what. In the morning, once it's light enough, we'll ride for the Keep. Should be back there by midday, and they'll be able to give you the information I can't."

"Keep?"

"Castle Urquhart," Duncan said, a smile on his face. "Clan Grant's home."

"Grant. That's you, huh?" This was good. If she focused on inane details like surnames and family history, she might be able to avoid collapsing in a heap. Still, she could feel her entire body trembling with fear, exhaustion, and shock, and she tugged the cloak tighter around herself, wishing like hell she was home in her warm, cozy bed. Duncan was looking at her closely, a mixture of worry and pity on his face. God, she hated being pitied. But she supposed she looked rather pitiful, right now — her hair plastered to her head, making her look like a drowned rat, her petite frame absolutely swallowed by the cloak, no doubt a look of abject misery on her face...

"I think stories of my family can wait until the morning," Duncan said softly. "What do you say to getting some rest?"

"Where?" she said blankly, turning to look around as though a motel was going to materialize on the side of the road. Duncan gestured to the fire with a shrug.

"You've never slept beneath the stars? It's a fine enough night. And your clothes will be dry by morning." As she watched, he put a piece of wood onto the fire, which had grown to a steady and warming blaze as they'd talked. Curiosity pricked at her despite her

exhaustion.

"Where'd the firewood come from?"

"I'd just been about to make camp when I saw you splashing around out there," Duncan said with a smile. "Almost as though someone chose the perfect time to deliver you to me."

Really, she thought. Deliver her to him... like some kind of package, some kind of prize. Maybe it was the result of the trauma she'd been through, but something about that made a chill run up her spine. She felt suddenly vulnerable, wrapped in this cloak... but Duncan, thankfully, had his eyes on the fire and didn't seem about to impinge on her personal space. He could, though, couldn't he? Helena was suddenly acutely aware that she was alone and mostly naked with a strange man.

"Are you alright, Helena?"

"Fine," she said automatically. Old habit — stick a shield up. She usually did it with her patients' parents — put up a bland, smiling persona for them to look at, something that assuaged any worries they might have about their children that also didn't give away any insights about what she might think about their parenting. It also came in handy for keeping her own feelings secret from strangers.

But Duncan was peering at her closely. "You don't look fine, lass. You look like you're just about to drop off that rock. Come on," he said firmly, getting to his feet and gesturing at the patch of grass closest to the fire. "Lay yourself out here, nice and close to the fire. With what you've been through, I'll bet you'll be fast asleep in no time."

Fear prickled at her again. What if he wanted her to lie down so she'd be more vulnerable? What if he was about to attack her? But reason quickly conquered that panicky little knee-jerk reaction. If he'd wanted to do something untoward, he'd hardly have needed to wait for her to lie down. She was barely clothed and wrapped in his cloak. And she had to admit... the thought of lying down was very inviting to her exhausted, aching body. So, trying to hide the suspicious look from her face, she gathered herself awkwardly and lay herself down by the fire, doing her best to stop too much skin being exposed to the cold night air — or to Duncan's eye. He made a show of turning away and focusing on the horizon when she was settling down, but she didn't want to risk him catching a glimpse of her — well, of any part of her that wasn't usually covered, which was the majority of her flesh, if she was honest.

"I'll keep watch over you, Helena," Duncan promised, settling himself down by the fire again with his back to the rock.

She could just see him out of the corner of her eye where she was lying, her head pillowed beneath her hands and the cloak wrapped completely around her. It wasn't the most comfortable mattress she'd ever lain on, but right now, with the exhaustion of her ordeal finally rushing up to claim her, she couldn't have brought herself to move from it if she'd tried.

"And in the morning, we'll talk a little more about just where you are."

"Thank you," she said softly, feeling oddly guilty for suspecting him of wanting to harm her. Funny, the kinds of strange suspicions that stress and trauma brought out in a person. Sleep would help. And even if it wouldn't... well, she hardly had much choice right now, did she? And with a final, troubled sigh, Helena surrendered to the darkness that wanted to claim her and sank straight into the deep oblivion of sleep.

Chapter 7

She woke slowly, from what felt like the longest dream she'd ever had. For a moment, her drowsy brain connected the events of the previous night to the bizarre dream she'd then fallen into, and she felt curiously suspended and relieved, briefly convinced that all of it had been a dream — not just the lake and the handsome Scotsman, but the car crash, too, the daring flight through the mountains, even the session with Josh. All a dream... what a relief. For her, as well as the fictional little boy who'd been covered in such vivid bruises...

But it wasn't a dream, was it? Josh had been as real as she was... and the ugly glint in his father's eye wasn't something she could ever have dreamed up. Dismay pounded at her chest as her mind worked its merciless way through the memories that she'd had such high hopes of being false. She really had tried to leave town, really had ended up in an awful, life-or-death car chase on the steep mountain roads... really had gone plunging off the edge of the cliff and into... what? Strange darkness? For the first time, she remembered the eerie visions she'd had for an interminable period between the car and the lake. The glowing outlines of the figures, the way she'd seemed to be lying in a bed composed entirely of empty void.

The way, she realized with a strange pounding in her chest, the figures had seemed to want to take care of her. She had no idea how she knew this, as they hadn't spoken or communicated to her in any way, but it felt so right, so true, that they'd been helping her. That they'd... could it be that they'd healed her? Was that why she didn't seem to be bearing any signs of having been in a horrendous car accident, even though it was impossible for her to have escaped harm given what had happened?

Those figures, she knew, hadn't been a dream. Neither had the lake... as she woke, she could hear the gentle sloshing of the water against the shore, banishing all hopes that her waking up in the water had been a fiction. Duncan was real, too. She could smell the scent of him on his cloak, musky and masculine and very, very pleasant. What hadn't been real, though, were the dreams that had

claimed her after she'd settled down by the fire to sleep.

Or had they? Dreams about glowing figures, dreams about her body being torn and obliterated and disintegrated... dreams about the car plunging down the cliffside, down, down, down, the ringing of her own horrified screaming far too loud in her ears before the sickening crunch of impact. And — she picked her way through what she remembered of the dream, horrified but too fascinated to stop — the memory of the car crunching and twisting around her like it wasn't made of metal but instead of plastic, the memory of her body being crushed and ripped and torn, the memory of blood slick on her skin and the sickening, impossible sensation of her head being crushed by the impact with the steering wheel.

It was vivid. It was all horribly, horribly vivid... and what was most vivid of all was the sensation that had followed in that strange dream-sense of distorted chronological time, of suddenly not being in the twisted wreckage of the car any longer. In the dream — was it a dream? — she had felt the life leaving her body, actually felt the electricity in her brain begin to die as the damage she was sustaining had presumably become too much to recover from. But then she was gone from all that, captured and suspended in an inky darkness that was at once terrifying and unbelievably comforting.

And then — then the dream had changed, shifted. She'd been drawn out of the world as though she was a puddle of liquid that had been sucked up through a straw, and in this strange new place between the past and the future, she felt her body slowly reassembling itself. Her crushed, shattered head was first — she could actually feel her skull swelling out, the bone returning to its rightful place, the soft tissue inside doing the same. What was really horrific, more than the intricate sensorial details of such profound healing — had she ever had such a detailed dream? — was that she felt no pain at all. Somehow, that was worse than the alternative. The knowledge of how much pain such catastrophic injuries ought by all rights to have caused weighed heavily on her, sinking her deep into confusion and horror... and dread, deep, bone-twisting dread, that at some point her synapses would catch up and flood her with the kind of pain that nobody could recover from.

She knew a little about trauma when it came to the psychological side of things, of course. Many of her patients had been through abuse or neglect, be it physical or sexual, and she knew the toll it took on a person... but none of her patients had

ever experienced the kind of absolute physical disintegration that this very vivid dream seemed to be telling her about. And as her eyes began to flicker open, more in resistance to reliving any more of the awful dream that was strictly necessary, she felt her hand come up to touch her head gingerly, as if checking that it was all still there.

"Good morning."

Helena stifled a scream, sitting bolt upright as the rasp of Duncan's voice startled her fully out of her half-dreaming reverie. She couldn't help but laugh as she forced her panicked body to relax, shaking her head as he stammered awkward apologies. He was sitting by the fire, the horse blanket around his shoulders, but by the look of his weary face he hadn't slept the way she had. It was still early — the sky was gray, tinged a little with pink, and she had a suspicion it was close to dawn. Still, there was more than enough light to see by, to take in the smouldering remains of the fire... and what lay beyond it, which the night before had been obscured by the darkness.

Helena gazed beyond their little campsite, taken aback by the beauty of the place she found herself in. The grassy slope they were camped on went up a little further, culminating in a crest on which there seemed to be a kind of dirt road — less a road than a wide path, really, that wound on as far as she could see. It seemed to follow the contours of the lake, which — she turned her head to the body of water she'd so nearly drowned in — was absolutely enormous, spreading away out of sight over the horizon. A shiver ran through her. What if she'd been dropped further out, somehow? She'd barely made it to shore as it was. Then again — who had dropped her in the lake in the first place? Who — or what?

"It's beautiful here," she said softly, her eyes drifting back to the road. Beyond the path, there was a thick blanket of trees, which similarly seemed to go on a great distance — a forest, she assumed. Did this road surround the whole lake, with the forest on the other side? What she didn't see, as she scanned the area, was any sign of human habitation — unless you counted the road. "Where exactly are we?"

"We're a few hours' ride from the nearest town," Duncan said, shaking his head thoughtfully as he looked at her. "I'm returning to the Keep after delivering a message to one of the more remote guard posts. Small miracle I happened to be making camp right

here when I heard your cries last night."

"I don't think that's small at all," Helena said faintly, her eyes flicking to the enormous lake. "What if I'd been dropped a mile further that way? Or further out?"

"Then we wouldn't be having this conversation, I'd warrant," Duncan said with a shrug. He didn't seem especially concerned, though, and she frowned.

"You're being awfully cavalier about my near-death experience."

"My apologies," he said softly, looking back up at her. "It's just... ah, I'm no expert in any of this, but... there's a reason you were in such a convenient place, lass."

"A reason?" She narrowed her eyes. Was he about to start preaching to her? "Like God?"

But that made him splutter laughter — still a pleasant sound, she couldn't help but admit, feeling another flush of warmth in her belly. Even though he was laughing at her, it still felt good to have made him laugh. "No, lass. My word. No, it's... it's the Sidhe."

"The what?"

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I'm just about the opposite of an expert, but... they're Fae nobles, basically. Difficult to understand, and capricious in their ways, but... they're good people, and they usually have our best interests at heart. I'd warrant they knew exactly what they were doing when they dropped you in this specific part of Loch Ness — though from the amount of water you took in, they were certainly cutting it fine."

"Sidhe," she repeated slowly, the word feeling strange and alien on her tongue. "Fae?"

"Faeries," Duncan said, frankly.

And this time it was her time to laugh, raising a hand to cover her mouth even as she shuffled herself into a more comfortable position beneath the cloak that had kept her comfortably warm all night. "Really? Faeries dumped me in the lake. That's the story you're going with?"

"I told you it would all seem ridiculous at first," Duncan said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "As I said, I'm no expert. But I'm willing to take you to those who are."

"Oh, yes. We'd better consult the faerie experts," she said, fighting back laughter that felt like it might border on the hysterical. "Maybe if we're lucky they'll tell us a little about dragons, too."

"How else do you think you got here, Helena?" he said bluntly, fixing her with an unimpressed stare that chilled the laughter right out of her. "I'd imagine you were in something of a dire situation, last thing you can remember — would I be right?"

A flash of her dream, of the screeching metal, the blood slick on her body... and her smile faded as she nodded mutely, feeling chastened.

"Aye. It's the Sidhe who pulled you out of that situation and dropped you here. Can't say I understand it myself, why they do it, what criteria they use to choose the women they save and bring back here to us — but that's what happened to you. They did you a great favor, Helena. They saved your life, and I'd be very careful about how mirthful I was."

Feeling thoroughly scolded, she nodded her head, torn between resentment and the lingering thread of hysteria that hadn't quite subsided. Faeries? He was telling her that faeries brought her here, pulled her out of the car wreck? Flashes of her dream, of the way she'd felt as though her body and spirit were being drawn through some metaphysical doorway and into a dark she'd never seen before, never understood... and she thought, again, of those strange glowing figures she'd hallucinated in that bizarre in-between space. Was it possible that for once, the more reasonable explanation for what had clearly been a psychotic episode was that it wasn't a psychotic episode at all? Was it possible that her visions had been the actual truth of what was happening — that the dream wasn't an anxiety-ridden fantasy, but in fact an obscured memory of what had actually taken place?

She felt a shudder run down her spine, not liking the potential ramifications of what she was thinking. If that was true, she'd have to accept all kinds of absurd conclusions... like magic being real. Magic, as well as time travel. And she'd have to confront the fact that she just might be somewhere utterly, utterly alien to her... and as she let herself consider, for the first time, that this might be reality and not some trauma-induced fever dream, she felt her body start to tremble again.

"Your clothes dried nicely overnight," Duncan told her softly, and she realized with a start that she'd been silent for several minutes, staring into the remnants of the fire with a no-doubt miserable expression on her face. "I'll get the horse ready to leave while you dress."

He got to his feet and headed off to where his horse had been tethered overnight, and Helena stayed where she was, staring at the ashes of the little fire in front of her that had kept her warm through the night. She felt a little like those ashes — the remnants of what she once had been, utterly exhausted, utterly burned out.

She'd never felt so absolutely lost in all her days.

Chapter 8

She stared at the fire for another minute or two. She felt dreamy, unreal, like she was about to become unmoored from reality completely and drift away... in a distant part of her mind she knew that what she was experiencing was called dissociation, that it was a warning sign of pretty significant trauma, and that she had to do something about it as soon as possible. But it was so tempting to just sit here, to let her mind empty, to let her awareness wash out of her body and into the gray sky above her...

But she couldn't. Not right now. She needed to figure out where she was, what was happening... she needed to find some way out of this bizarre nightmare she'd woken up in... but what really clinched it for her was a spark of anger, deep down in her chest, that if she let herself give up like this, that the monster who'd run her off the road like that would win. What had happened to him? she wondered. Helena worked back through the memories of that horrible night, trying to remember what she'd seen of his truck after that final, terrifying moment when he'd collided with her and sent her plummeting from the edge of the cliff. Had he been... yes, she was almost sure of it. He'd crashed too, his car had also gone off the edge of the precipice.

Did that mean the Sidhe, whoever they were, had saved him, too? Was she about to run into him, wading out of the lake with some horrible, twisted expression on his face? That image was enough to chill her bones and startle her out of her dissociative state. And with her teeth gritted, she set about getting dressed. Duncan was some distance away, fussing with the horse — she could hear his voice as he spoke to the horse, presumably entreating it to let him saddle it, and she felt a soft smile cross her face as she pulled her shirt and jacket from the rocks they'd been drying on. Just as Duncan had said, they were dry, and once she'd pulled them on, she felt a great deal less vulnerable.

Her shoes, unfortunately, were still a bit soggy — it seemed a night by a fire hadn't been quite enough to get the lake water out of the soles, and they squelched a little when she put her feet into

them, making her wrinkle her nose with displeasure. Still, it felt good to be dressed again, and she neatly folded the cloak before rising to her feet a little unsteadily and picking her careful way across the grass to where Duncan had saddled the horse. He flashed her a quick smile, and she smiled back, amused by how far she had to tilt her head back to look at him when they were both standing. God, he must have been six-foot-two if he was an inch. She wasn't a tall woman by any stretch of the imagination, but even her much taller sister would have had trouble seeing eye to eye with this man.

God, her sister. A pang of grief hit her. Julia would be so worried about her.

"What's the matter?" He was perceptive, this red-haired giant.

She shook her head, biting her lip a little. "Just thinking about my sister," she said softly. "She's going to be so worried about me. I wish I could call her, but..." She sighed. "My bag was in the car." Duncan looked torn between sympathy and something else, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "What? You look like I said something stupid."

"It's just —" He took a deep breath. "Again, I'm no expert. But from what I understand, you're from our future, yes?"

This stupid nonsense again. *Best to play along*, she told herself, suppressing the urge to roll her eyes. *Time travel. Sure. Why the hell not.* "Right."

"Then — your sister hasn't even been born yet," he said simply, spreading his hands. "So, there's no need to worry about whether she's thinking about you right now."

"Great," she said faintly, feeling a rush of vertigo that almost sent her stumbling until Duncan steadied her. She found herself standing close to him, feeling the heat of his body, the warmth of his hand on her arm, the concerned look on his face as he gazed down at her, and for a moment she was completely frozen for reasons that had nothing to do with her shock at where she was, at *when* she was... and then he cleared his throat and stepped back, looking a little embarrassed.

"Can you ride?" he asked gruffly, gesturing to the horse behind him, which looked at her with a keen intelligence in its dark eyes.

"I used to be in a pony club," she said faintly, thinking back to her childhood, trotting around a ring on an overfed little horse that had absolutely no interest in any of the guidance she was trying to give it. "But I'm not exactly an expert."

"It's easy enough when you're walking," Duncan said with a shrug. "Here — let me help you up."

"Are we both going to —"

"I'll walk," he said, shaking his head. "The two of us might be a bit of a tall order for the horse, especially after the long ride back from the guard post," he said, giving the horse an affectionate pat on the shoulder.

The bond between the two of them was clear, and Helena wondered if he always rode the same horse when he went on his deliveries. A medieval deliveryman. Fancy that.

He helped boost her up onto the horse's back, and it wasn't long before she was settled in the saddle, feeling a little out of place, but grateful for her childhood memories of pony club that made the experience not a complete shock. They set off, Duncan walking beside the horse with the reins in one hand, the easy, rolling gait comfortable and easy to sit to. Helena felt a flash of regret that he wasn't sitting up here with her — she imagined it, with a guilty little thrill, him sitting behind her with his legs around her, the warmth of his body pressing into her whenever she leaned casually back against his strong, solid form...

The blush that rose to her cheeks was stronger this time, and she was fiercely glad that Duncan was keeping his eyes on the road ahead of them.

As they traveled, the sun rose further into the sky, banishing more of that dawn chill and almost making the weather pleasant... though it was still a little colder than Helena would have liked. Duncan was humming to himself as he walked, his stride regular and steady and in almost perfect sync with the horse's footsteps, and she smiled to herself, her eyes drifting from Duncan to the landscape around them. It was beautiful, she had to admit. The dark waters of the lake, lapping softly at the rocky shores... the gray sky spread out above them, pierced through with occasional patches of bright blue when the clouds gave way to a clear sky beyond... the trees to their left, the breeze whispering through their branches.

Occasionally, they'd pass a fork in the road where it turned and headed off through the trees, and each time she peered down it as far as she could, curious despite herself about where the paths led. Duncan would tell her the name of the town that lay down each road, but she never recognized the places. It was hard to believe that there were people living around this place, honestly, that there

was anything else out there beyond the stirring of the wind in the trees and the lapping of the water on the shore...

"We should be at the Keep by afternoon," Duncan told her, breaking a long, meditative silence. "Are you hungry?"

"No," she replied automatically... but then she felt her stomach growl unexpectedly and realized with a start that it had to have been a long while since her last meal. She'd been too distracted with packing and planning her journey to have dinner the night before and had been planning a room service feast when she got to her hotel... which meant that her last meal had been lunch the previous day. A day ago, in a completely different era.... "Maybe a little. Will there be lunch there?"

"I can do better than that," he said brightly, clicking his tongue as he brought the horse to a halt and reached into one of the saddlebags that hung down just behind Helena's legs. He drew out a wrapped bundle of something in soft cloth, and her eyes widened a little as he revealed what the little package contained.

"Jerky?" she said, grinning broadly as he offered her a piece of the cured meat. It looked a little different from the plastic-wrapped packets of flavored beef jerky she always picked up as a healthy-ish snack from the grocery store... but the smell was undeniably the same. Duncan chuckled as she took a few strips, taking some for himself too before returning the empty bundle to the saddlebag.

"Cured meat's a Godsend on the road."

"I always get it at gas stations," Helena agreed with a grin... but Duncan's nonplussed expression made her snort laughter. "I suppose you don't have gas stations, huh? Or roads."

"We're on a road," he pointed out blankly, gesturing downwards.

"I mean real roads. Asphalt roads. For cars and trucks and —" He was looking at her blankly, and she rolled her eyes. "Never mind." If she was honest, a part of her had been hoping that he'd slip up — that he'd reveal that he knew about modern technology, that he'd give himself away somehow, that she could return to the comforting conviction that he was just a fairly convincing medieval re-enactor. But that possibility seemed to grow more and more unlikely the further they traveled.

It wasn't long after their jerky break that the Keep came into view. At first, she couldn't figure out what it was — a strange blot on the horizon that she shaded her eyes to get a better look at, frowning a little. Duncan grinned back at her over his shoulder.

"Good eye. That's Castle Urquhart."

As they grew closer, her sense of awe only increased. The dark blob on the horizon grew and grew, and the closer they got the more details she could make out — the dark stone, the crenellations at the top, even the wall that stood around the outside of it. But she couldn't help but frown. "It almost looks like it's in the lake."

"Aye, it is," Duncan said with a bright grin gleaming in his eye. "Or more to the point, it's on an island in the lake. There's a narrow land bridge that connects the island to the mainland, the Keep stands on the island itself, and there's a wall around the edge, too, just in case there's any attacks from the water."

That was a sobering thought. "And are there?"

"Now and again," Duncan acknowledged with a shrug. "But at this point, it's pretty clear to everyone in the area that the Keep's all but impossible to besiege. It's just about the safest place in a hundred miles," he told her firmly.

She felt a chill run down her spine. The idea that she'd need safety hadn't really occurred to her... but she supposed if it really was the sixteenth century, being a woman alone wasn't exactly the safest thing she could be, now was it? She felt an odd burst of gratitude for the castle that loomed on the horizon and felt herself gently squeeze the horse's sides with her legs, urging him to move a little faster, to get them there just a touch sooner.

Safety sounded nice. But at the same time, she couldn't help but wonder if there weren't new and horrible revelations waiting for her in that imposing black stone building, looming closer and closer on the horizon as the horse carried her there. It had been a hell of a morning, and that was putting it lightly. Helena was beginning to wonder just how much more of this chaos she could take.

Still — what was her alternative? Wading back out into the lake? Living in the woods? Absolutely not. She was always telling her patients to be brave, to believe in themselves... and that was just what she was going to have to do, for now.

After all, in the end — what choice did she have?

Chapter 9

Duncan hadn't been kidding about the land bridge. It was a fascinating formation, a narrow strip of rock that extended from the shore right out to the island on which the Keep stood. At the end of the bridge stood a tall and foreboding iron gate, with towers atop it where men were standing to attention. She couldn't help but feel like they were looking at her, and for a moment wished she still had Duncan's cloak to pull in tight around herself. But she held her head high, trying to fake a confidence that she didn't feel. Not yet, at any rate. But it was a useful psychological truth that if you performed the body language associated with a feeling or emotion, that often it was a way of manifesting that feeling. She just hoped a confident posture would outweigh her fear, or at least balance it a little.

They rode along the land bridge, and she peered curiously over the sides, down to the dark water below. No wonder Duncan had made the point that the castle was notoriously hard to besiege — she couldn't imagine trying to march on such a well-defended castle, especially not if the men on the walls all had bows and arrows — which she suspected they did, at least from the silhouettes she could make out from down here. As they rode closer to the wall, she heard Duncan call out in greeting, raising his arm to wave at the men atop the wall, who waved back cheerfully enough.

"You've brought a woman home!" one of them shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth to be heard. "That's one for the history books!"

"She's the ninth of them," Duncan shouted back, something solemn and meaningful in his voice — and the mood atop the wall shifted immediately, with the men exchanging glances that were as full of surprise as they were of delight.

"Nine! I'll get the Laird!"

Duncan shook his head, grinning a little as one of the men disappeared from the top of the wall.

"What's a Laird?" Helena asked in a whisper, a little concerned. An image of some kind of collar had sprung to her mind — some device to confine her. The way the men had looked at each other it

was like she was some kind of collector's item.

But Duncan chuckled. "The Laird's in charge of the clan and the keep. Donal Grant is our current Laird — he's a good man," Duncan added with a smile.

"Grant? Family member?"

"Aye, a distant cousin." But before she could ask any more questions, Helena jumped as a squeal of metal indicated that the gate was creaking open. Duncan led her through on horseback, and she got her first proper look at Castle Urquhart from the ground up.

It was absolutely enormous, of course. It sat like a squat behemoth in the far corner of the courtyard, its dark stone walls rising sharply into the sky, cut out against the gray clouds. There were at least six stories, from what she could make out, and as she stared at it, she felt an itching impulse to climb it, to get to the very top to see just how much of the countryside around them she could make out from up there.

But her gaze was quickly drawn from the castle to the courtyard. There were people moving around here, most of them giving her curious looks — a dozen men in one corner, training with wooden swords an exercise from which they all seemed to be taking a quick break to gawk at the newcomer and on the other side of the courtyard stood a couple of low buildings that she presumed must have been the stables, from the horses being led in and out. Duncan was leading the horse that way, and as they approached the stables a couple of grooms emerged, wide-eyed as they stared up at her.

"Is it true, Duncan?" one of them asked her companion, his voice full of wonder. "The Sidhe have sent us another?"

"Seems that way," Duncan said gruffly. "Can I leave the horse with you? I'll need to escort Lady Helena inside to meet the Laird."

"Of course, of course." The man gave her a thoroughly curious look, and she revised her use of epithet — he was more of a boy than a man, quite tall but gangly, maybe eighteen or nineteen — if that. He sketched her a weird little bow, and she fought the urge to laugh as Duncan helped her climb down from the horse. She stumbled a little on the hard black stone, and he steadied her again as the groom led the horse away to some well-earned rest and a bucket of oats.

"Ready?" Duncan asked.

She nodded. She wasn't ready, of course. Was he kidding? Ready to walk into a medieval castle and meet a Laird? Absolutely not.

She was barely holding it together — barely balancing the thousand cacophonous voices in her head shouting all kinds of different psychological theories that would explain the utterly unbelievable experience she was currently going through. Hallucination, psychosis, trauma-induced break from reality, the death throes of a dying brain... but she took a deep breath and straightened her spine anyway, striding confidently along at Duncan's side as they headed back across the courtyard and toward the Keep.

There were half a dozen stairs that led up to an enormous pair of double doors — she could see that they could be bolted if necessary, but this morning they were standing open to allow people to hurry in and out. And as they stepped through the door, her eyes widened. They were standing in an enormous entrance hall, grand and decorated with intricately woven tapestries that surprised her with the range of colors on display. Every piece of medieval art she'd seen had always seemed so drab, shades of gray, and brown, and beige... but these were beautiful. Duncan waited as she took them in, gazing around the space — they seemed to tell the stories of the members of the Clan, and she kept seeing the same tartan that Duncan was wearing. A connection became clear.

"Are those the family colors?"

"Aye, Clan tartan," Duncan agreed with a smile. "Good eye."

"These are amazing," she said softly. The art was almost enough to distract her from the underlying terror at where she was and what was happening to her... and Duncan's arm in hers was reassuring, too, as he took her through another pair of doors that led through into an even bigger hall.

This one, though, was full of tables, and she couldn't help but smile at a sudden and rather strange association with summer camp, the enormous mess hall with long wooden tables. This had a similar vibe, a hall full of long tables groaning with food — they must have arrived around lunch time, and there were plenty of people eating in the hall, all turning curious faces up to look at the new arrival in the doorway. Not for the first time that day, she felt oddly vulnerable, insecure in the strange clothes she was wearing, knowing that they stood out strongly among the medieval outfits she was seeing.

God — if this was some kind of medieval re-enactment, she was going to be so angry. But could a re-enactment — even a passionate, enthusiastic one — really be this ... this huge? There

were dozens of people involved here, if not hundreds. The more time passed, the more she was beginning to suspect that everything around her — all of this improbable madness — was actually real. Did that mean she was going mad, or was that the sanest response to an insane set of circumstances?

Helena could feel her mind trying to spin out of control again, that dissociative tendency rearing its ugly head, and she clenched her jaw, trying to ground herself in physical sensations to stop herself from disappearing into the sky again. Thankfully, there were plenty of grounding sensations to explore here — not least of which were the delicious smells in the air, making her stomach growl fiercely, even though they'd had the dried meat not so long ago. She supposed it had been a pretty paltry breakfast, all things considered... besides, she'd been through a lot. Duncan seemed to be on a similar page — she saw his gray eyes flick left and right, sizing up the available food on the tables, and she hid a grin. Maybe they'd have lunch together, once she'd met this Laird, whoever he was.

He was, it turned out, a surprisingly young man, sitting with a cluster of other men on a table at the far end of the hall, elevated a little above the others by means of a low platform that looked a little like a stage. Duncan made the introductions with an odd touch of formality that surprised her, and she blinked up at Laird Donal as he rose to his feet to greet her, not sure whether she should bow or curtsy or simply stick out her hand for him to shake. She settled for a wan smile — and to her relief that seemed to be enough for him as a bright smile broke out across his handsome features. He was definitely a good-looking man, too — and she suspected she could see the family resemblance, especially in the eyes. He and Duncan had the same clear, gray eyes — though she had a feeling Duncan was a little older. And if she was making a choice... well, she'd choose Duncan.

Not that anybody was asking her to choose. *Good Lord, Helena*, she scolded herself, surprised by the flavor of this particular distraction. Developing a crush in record time had never been a stress response for her before... then again, she'd never been in this kind of stressful situation before, had she? Maybe she'd write a paper about all this when she got back home. It was a reassuring thought... though she didn't want to spend too much time thinking about just what getting back home would entail. It had been

traumatic enough traveling backwards in time — if, after all, that was even what had happened. Part of her was holding out hope that all of this was just a deeply, deeply bizarre dream.

"Helena Gray, may I introduce Laird Donal of Clan Grant," Duncan said behind her, his voice full of respect.

"Welcome to Castle Urquhart, Lady Helena," the Laird said with a smile crinkling those gray eyes and making her feel a lot more at ease than she had on the way in here. "Please — would you join us for lunch?"

She nodded, feeling shy, and Duncan moved up beside her as the two of them took some seats at the table. The Laird called for more food to be brought, and it wasn't long before a couple of servants bustled out with more food and drink for herself and Duncan — a plate of what looked like roasted meat, with what she presumed to be mashed potatoes and a generous heaping of gravy, too. Her stomach felt like it was going to turn itself inside out and her mouth was watering, but she forced herself to eat slowly, worried that she might break some law of etiquette if she ate before the Laird. The food was absolutely delicious, though she resisted the urge to shovel it in as quickly as she might have if she'd been alone.

"I did my best to fill Helena in about — well, about what brought her here, but I'm far from an expert," Duncan was explaining to the Laird as the two of them ate.

He was standing on considerably less ceremony than she was, shoveling meat into his mouth just about as fast as he could, and she fought the urge to laugh as he hastily swallowed his mouthful in order to speak to the Laird.

"I was hoping your lady wife might be around to speak with her about it all."

"Anna's otherwise engaged today, I'm afraid," Laird Donal said with a shake of his head.

Married, then — that made sense, Helena thought with a quiet grin. A man with those good looks wouldn't have any shortage of women to choose from... his political position notwithstanding. But why did Duncan want her to meet this Anna woman? Was she some kind of expert on — on faeries, or folklore, or something?

"As are the rest of them — they're having a reunion of sorts in the village, from what I can gather. They'll be back tomorrow."

"Unfortunate," Duncan said, clicking his tongue. "I'm sure Helena will want to meet them."

"Why's that?" she asked around a mouthful of potato, frowning a little.

"Oh, I didn't tell you. Lady Anna, Laird Donal's wife, was the first of the time-lost women to turn up at our gates."

Helena's eyes widened as Laird Donal nodded. "She's from your time, Helena. The twenty-first century."

"Did she crash her car too?" Helena said faintly, feeling completely at a loss. Other women had come through? She wasn't alone in this bizarre plight?

"No, though her life was similarly at risk," Laird Donal said softly, a shadow passing across his face. "Without the intervention of the Sidhe, I'm sure that my Anna would be dead."

Helena felt a shiver run down her spine as she thought of that horrifying night. It felt like it was already receding into the past, as though it had happened years ago... though she suspected that was just a defense mechanism; her mind trying to pretend that nothing had happened to keep her functioning in this new, similarly strange situation. "They — they must have saved my life too, I think," she said softly. "I was driving alone through the mountains, when —" She hesitated, remembering her audience. "I was driving a car. They're like —"

"We know," the man sitting by Donal's side broke in, his dark eyes dancing with mirth.

He had coppery hair and a lean build, and there was a little of the family resemblance here, too, though she saw more of it in the way that Donal glanced at him, a little exasperated but still fond — the way an older brother looks at a younger brother. She'd be willing to bet real money on that being the relationship between these two.

"Malcolm Grant," he introduced himself. He looked younger than Donal, maybe in his early twenties, though he had a quiet strength that told her that youth didn't necessarily equate to immaturity here. "My wife Nancy was the second woman to come through from your time. You're probably speaking to the only half-dozen or so men in the whole country who'll understand your fancy future references."

She blinked, a little taken aback by this. "So, Anna, and Nancy —"

"Then my Elena." That was a burly, dark-haired man sitting a little further down the table.

"Brendan Grant, Captain of the Guard," Duncan introduced her, smiling a little. "Elena's husband."

"I'm noticing a pattern here," Helena said drily, drawing a laugh from the table. Quietly, she wondered if it had been trauma that had driven all of these women into relationships with what she assumed were just about the first men they'd met when they arrived here — but she was hardly going to bring up that theory among these people she'd just met, was she? No — she'd keep her worries to herself for now.

At least until she could have a conversation with the women in question, to figure out just what kind of bizarre hostage situation was going on here.

Chapter 10

Besides — despite her kneejerk suspicion about these time-traveling women immediately falling into marriages with these men, on the other side of the coin there was something she liked about these men. Something imposing, but friendly about them — something that made her feel safe in their company. Protected, almost. The way she'd felt when Duncan had pulled her out of the lake with his arm around her shoulder...

"Who came next? Kay?"

"No, I think it was Helen," Brendan said with a frown. "Shame Liam and Niall aren't here, they'd remember the order."

"Don't tell me they're husbands, too?"

"Aye, I'm afraid so," Donal said with a chuckle, breaking a piece of bread in half and taking a bite. "Our harbormaster Niall is married to Helen, and Kay is our stablemaster Liam's wife."

She was beginning to feel a little faint. "Who else?"

"Karen — she and her husband Connor live in the village most of the time, though. She's their healer now," Malcolm said, seeming to be counting the women off on his fingertips. "And... oh, most recently, Julia and Melanie." Helena held her breath. "Married to Galen and Aelfred."

"Grant, I'm assuming," Helena said drily.

The men nodded, clearly amused by the story — so she hid her discomfiture behind a broad smile.

"That's — kind of romantic, isn't it?"

"Aye, I suppose so," Donal said with a grin. "They certainly keep us on our toes, these women from the future. The things they know, the knowledge they've brought with them..." He shook his head. "But that's enough about all of us, Helena. Tell us about yourself."

"Um." She took a deep breath, suddenly feeling like she was at a job interview. What was she supposed to tell them about her profession? Psychology hadn't been a real discipline until — well, debate raged, historically speaking, but Freud was generally considered the father of the discipline, for all his faults and foibles, and he wouldn't be born for another... God, several hundred years.

That made her dizzy. "I work with children," she said softly.

"Oh, you can take ours off our hands, then," Malcolm said brightly, exchanging a mischievous look with his brother.

"We've both got young daughters," Donal explained with a grin. "They're a handful and no mistake."

Helena couldn't help but smile. "How old?"

"Three and two," Malcolm said.

Helena chuckled. "I usually work with slightly older children. Five and older, as a general rule, though I have colleagues who specialize in younger..." She hesitated. How to explain psychology to these men? "I'm — well, a kind of doctor, but I specialize in the mind, not the body."

"Interesting," Donal said thoughtfully, looking at her closely. "Anna has mentioned there's more of that kind of study in our future." He straightened a little, setting his fork down. "Which reminds me. Speaking of the future — Helena, I want you to know that you're more than welcome at Castle Urquhart — you're an honored guest for as long as you choose to stay. Stay forever if you'd like. We have a long history of taking in the women the Sidhe see fit to deliver to us."

Helena felt a little torn as she thanked him warmly for his hospitality, hiding her misgivings. On the one hand, she very much appreciated the knowledge that she had a roof over her head and three meals a day to rely on here in the castle — but with her immediate needs met, she still felt fear and paranoia creeping around the edges of her mind. There were too many unknowns, too much that she didn't understand just yet for her to feel comfortable just... moving straight in and committing herself to living here forever. But then again — what choice did she have?

Some of her misgivings must have shown in her face, because Donal's smile faded a little — but when she bit her lip, he gave her a reassuring smile. "But you must be exhausted. It's no small journey, the trip from your world to ours."

"I do feel a little tired," she admitted, feeling curiously embarrassed about her own physical frailty when confronted with these enormous men. Laird Donal nodded to Duncan, who got to his feet, his chair scraping on the wooden platform beneath them as he offered her his arm.

"A room has been prepared," Laird Donal confirmed. "Just guest quarters, for now, but let us know if you'd like more permanent

chambers and something can be arranged."

"Thank you," she said softly, not really sure how to do this. Did she bow? Offer her allegiance? He was a Lord, right? Or a Laird? Weren't they supposed to do some kind of... pledge? But nobody seemed to be expecting anything like that of her, so she simply ducked her head in a weird little bow and followed Duncan from the platform down into the main hall. Honestly, it was kind of a relief to get away. As much as she appreciated the men for taking her in, and for their hospitality and kindness, at the same time she was feeling rather overwhelmed. As though her mind was too full of information to take in any more. Even the names of the women whose footsteps she was supposedly walking in were hazy — there was an Anna, right, and a Kay? And six more... she shook her head, feeling a little dizzy as they finally reached the edge of the dining hall. Duncan's steadying hand was at her elbow, warm and solid, holding her up.

"Are you alright, Helena?"

Such concern in his voice — it made her chest feel warm.

"I'm fine," she said quickly, shaking her head. "Just a little — overwhelmed, I guess, with everyone in there. And tired," she added, feeling herself fighting back a yawn. "Very tired."

Duncan was nodding. "Sleeping under the stars isn't the most restful night a person can have — especially when you're not used to it. Let me show you to your room. You'll be able to rest there until dinner time." She tensed — and he gave her a soft smile. "You don't need to come back to the Hall for that, though. We can arrange to have meals brought to your room, for the time being at least, if you'd prefer to be on your own."

"I think I need some time to decompress," she said softly, glad that he'd sensed her reluctance and she didn't have to turn the invitation down more firmly. "But once I've rested a little I'd love to meet everyone —"

"Plenty of time for that," Duncan said firmly. "You don't need to stand on ceremony around us, alright? You're home now."

But she wasn't, that was the thing, wasn't it? She bit her lip, not willing to voice those thoughts right now... but as Duncan led her through the unfamiliar hallways of the castle, she'd never felt less at home in her life. So many portraits of strangers, so many tapestries of strange events she didn't know anything about... she barely knew the first thing about history, let alone European history... let alone

the specifics of medieval Scotland. What was the deal with Scotland? Weren't they at war with the English? Or maybe the Irish... or maybe both? Not for the first time, she regretted how disinterested the American education system had been in detailing the history of other countries... at least, countries that weren't directly involved in a war with them. All she knew was that this was just about as far from home as she could get... no matter what pleasant little niceties her companion might be offering her. Still, there was no need to be rude, and she followed meekly at his side.

The room Duncan showed her to was cozy and pleasant, at least, if a little impersonal. There was a narrow wooden bed on one side of the room, and on the other side was a narrow window that looked out over the waters of the Loch, with a good chunk of the countryside visible as well. There were curtains, too, and shutters, and Duncan closed both, bringing a pleasant darkness about in the room. She was already feeling sleepy, and Duncan, to her great relief, seemed to sense that he shouldn't hang about too long.

"If there's anything you need at all, you let me know," he told her firmly. "We'll sort out some spare clothing for you, of course. Call a servant if you need some food, something to drink... or just call me. My rooms are just down the hall," he added, gesturing over his shoulder. "The door with a great mark carved in it about shoulder height."

She opened her mouth to ask exactly how that had happened — but instead of words, a huge yawn came out. She covered her mouth, blushing a little, but Duncan only chuckled.

"Alright, lass. I'll leave you to your rest. Just know you're safe here, alright?"

She nodded, trying to hide her discomfiture as he left her to her own devices... and once she was alone, she sat down hard on the bed like a puppet with its strings cut, dropping her head into her hands, and finally letting a few of the backed-up tears out. Safe? She'd never felt less safe in her life.

Yes, the castle was big and scary, stuck out in the middle of a lake where nobody could get at her... nobody with a sword or a dagger, at least. She wasn't about to be besieged, or anything, so by that definition she was safe... but aside from that, she'd never felt more vulnerable in all her life. She was on the other side of the world and a few hundred years back in time... she couldn't have been further from home; from everything she knew; from things

that gave her comfort and strength and security. How was she supposed to be a person here, in this strange place, so far from anything she knew how to do? How was she supposed to do anything other than ... well, lie down in this cozy, slightly lumpy little bed and grieve everything she'd lost?

All she could bring herself to do right now was to crawl into bed and sob until she fell into an exhausted, tear-stained sleep that took her right through the afternoon.

Chapter 11

When Helena woke up, she felt utterly disoriented. No strange dreams this time, which was a small relief... instead, it felt like she was just emerging from a thick, dense black fog that had completely swallowed her for God knew how many hours. Until her memories came creeping back, she had no idea where she was — the stone ceiling above her was so unfamiliar, the feeling of the rough cotton sheets against her skin so strange that she felt like she could barely breathe. But then it all came rushing back, as memories so often did upon waking. The ride from the Loch to the Keep, the strange, strained lunch with all those men who kept chuckling at her knowingly and exchanging glances with Duncan as though they knew something that she didn't...

But there would be women, she told herself firmly, as the panic threatened to drown her. The men's wives were all from her time, from the future. They'd be familiar to her, they'd know what she was going through... even if they did all seem to have been roped into marriages to the strange, fierce men of this time. What was that about, exactly? A matter of personal protection? She'd done a fair bit of study about domestic violence — it was directly relevant to a lot of her work, after all — and she knew how often a hasty marriage concealed fear for someone's safety. It certainly didn't guarantee safety, though. Quite the opposite, in many cases.

That being said... the men she'd met didn't exactly seem like abusers. She wanted to believe, very much, that they were all good, kind men, that it was just a coincidence that the women they'd met had fallen in love with them so quickly... that there were eight happy, if rather strange, marriages between these women from the future and men from the past... but she was a little too much of a cynic to believe that too readily. No, she'd see what she could find out about these women and their relationships when she met them. She knew what to look for, what the signs were... she'd check whether they needed help, and...

And then what, Helena? She found herself questioning herself irritably, drifting in that liminal space between sleeping and

waking. Exactly what resources do you have at your disposal to help an abuse victim escape her husband? Absolutely none. She barely even knew where she was, where the nearest town was, let alone how to go about getting a woman out of here and to somewhere safe...

She took a deep breath, realizing that panic was creeping up again. This was just like her. Whenever she was in dire straits, she ended up searching out someone else who was in a worse place than her in the strange hope that reaching out to help them might somehow help her. It had always worked in the past... but right now, she had a suspicion that she might be over-exaggerating the interests of bringing that particular coping mechanism into play. She hadn't even met these women. It wasn't fair to assume that they were being manipulated or abused into their marriages... if anything, it was insulting to assume that all eight of them were victims. Maybe there was something else going on here. If she was going to accept that magic had brought her here — which was still only in third place when it came to her preferred explanations for what she was experiencing, after 'psychotic break' and 'dying hallucination' — then maybe she would also need to consider the idea that the Sidhe had also factored in romance in their schemes. Maybe they'd brought two people together who were destined to be together... and completely unbidden, the memory of her conversation with Duncan came up, how surprised she'd been by the coincidence of her turning up in the Loch just a few hundred yards from where he'd set up camp, how completely unsurprised he'd been.

A blush rose to her cheeks. That was something she was going to think about later, when she had the mental bandwidth to try. For now, well, for now, she wanted to comb her hair. Washing it would be ideal, of course — she'd kill for a nice hot shower to rinse the grimy lake water off her skin — but she'd settle for a comb right now. She'd tried pushing her fingers through it, but had run into resistance almost immediately, her hair having dried badly after being soaked in lake water and left to its own devices.

A cursory search of the room revealed a little chest of drawers on one side, and to her delight she found an ornate comb in the top drawer. Little victories really could be so bolstering, couldn't they? She withdrew it and settled on the edge of her bed to comb her hair, blinking the sleep out of her eyes as she tried to gauge what

time of day it was. Definitely evening, judging by the lack of light in the sky out there — she'd drawn back the curtain, but there wasn't much to see in the inky gloom of the evening.

It felt good, by dint of much tugging and fighting, to finally tame the mess that her hair had become. It felt good, honestly, to do something she'd done a thousand times, something that didn't require any conscious thought. She sat and combed her hair, wincing as she yanked tangle after tangle out, and by the time she had a sleek head of hair that was more or less under control, her mind was calm and clear.

And as if on cue, there came a tap at her door.

"Come in?" she called, feeling a little strange. For some reason, she hadn't fully internalized the idea that this space was hers, that she had any input about who did and didn't come in — but the slow way the door creaked open helped her catch up. There stood Duncan, a hopeful little smile on his handsome face and a covered tray in his hands. "Oh! Did I miss dinner?"

"Just about," he said with a smile. "It's alright. We figured you needed your rest."

"I really did," she admitted. "Though now I'm awake, I'm pretty hungry."

"That's why I've brought you supper," he said brightly, setting the tray down on the rustic, narrow wooden table that stood in the room before taking a seat. She rose and took the other one, the place where he'd set the meal down, and removed the covering. A huge bowl of what looked like stew, thick and dark, with chunks of meat floating in it as well as vegetables. It looked hearty, and wholesome, and exactly what she wanted... and even better, there was a handful of fresh bread rolls sitting beside it, still steaming slightly as though they'd only just come out of the oven.

"Thank you so much," she said softly, shaking her head before diving into the meal. She did her best to eat gracefully, to mind her manners, but it was difficult to eat stew like a high society lady, and it wasn't long before she was giggling a little at the mess she was making. "The food here's unreal, at least."

"Aye, that'd be Blair's handiwork," Duncan said with a broad smile. "She keeps us all well fed and fighting fit. No idea how she does it."

"Witchcraft, probably," Helena said with a grin. She'd meant it as a compliment, as a flippant little joke, but the look that crossed

Duncan's face frightened the smile from her face. "What?"

"Just —" He took a deep breath, looking uncomfortable. "We tend to be a little wary of that word, around here. I know it's not such a problem where you're from, the other women have made that much clear, but in these parts... well, best not to get in the habit of making such accusations."

"I'm sorry," she said softly, her mind racing. Of course — of course, it was the medieval era, how could she forget? Witch hunts, witch burnings, men in power who hated the idea of women having power and knowledge beyond what they could control so much that they'd put them to death... she felt a shiver run down her spine. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Of course," he said softly. "Like I said — I'm here to help you settle in. Anything you need. Even if it's a warning." His eyes twinkled. "But for the record... I think that's got something to do with it, too. Especially her shortbread. You haven't lived until you've tried Blair's shortbread..."

She couldn't help but laugh — a surprisingly free sound. It felt good. "So, we're pro-witchcraft, then?"

"Oh, aye. Very much so. The good kind, anyway." He shrugged his shoulders again, looking a little abashed. "Not that I'm any kind of expert, of course."

"You keep saying that," Helena said, looking at him closely. "You know far more than I do, so what's the point of undermining yourself like that?"

"I'm not undermining myself, I'm just — not an expert," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Book learning's never been much my strong suit. I just carry messages back and forth, that's my role. I do what I'm told, and other people make the clever decisions."

"I think you're cleverer than you let on, Duncan Grant," she said, tilting her head a little and looking at him with a smile dancing across her lips. There was something electric in the air between them, something sharp and fascinating in the way they were talking, in the look in his eyes.

God, was she trying to flirt with him? It had been years since she'd tried to flirt with anyone, since she'd had so much as a few dates with a guy... why the hell had her romantic imagination chosen now, of all times, to fire up? Still... it was a pleasant distraction, wasn't it, among a lot of distractions that had been anything but. Who was she to tell herself not to feel what she felt?

"Very kind of you," he said softly, smiling back. "But as for the subject of witchcraft and magic — and the broader subject, of course, of the Fae and the people who brought you here... well, I might not be an expert, but I do know one. She lives nearby, and in exchange for a gift, I'm sure she'd be more than happy to talk your ear off about everything she knows. She's a friend," Duncan said with a soft smile. "An old friend, and one of the Clan's strongest allies."

"I'd love to meet her," Helena said, realizing to her surprise that she meant it.

Somehow, the prospect of meeting more people, of trying to get to the bottom of this terrifyingly tangled mystery didn't seem as overwhelming as it had earlier. Was it really just a good nap and a solid meal that had made her feel so much braver than she'd felt earlier? Surely not. She suspected it had something to do with the company, too — with the way he'd come in to see her, with the warmth of his smile and the attentive way he listened to her. It was a little overwhelming in itself... but not quite in the same way that the crowded dining hall had been overwhelming. No, this was the kind of overwhelming that made her want more.

"I'd be more than happy to take you on a ride down to her cottage at your leisure," Duncan said, oddly formal. "If you'd like."

"I'd like that very much. Maybe after I meet all the other women like me, though?" she added, frowning a little. "I'd feel rude, going and getting the full story from someone else before I get the chance to meet the other travelers."

"Of course," Duncan said firmly. "They'll be traveling back to the Keep tomorrow, so I'd imagine you'll meet them over supper. But in a few days — what's say you and I go for a ride?"

"It's a date," she said softly, smiling at him.

It was just about the bravest she'd ever been in her life, and she'd only been able to use the word because she was ninety percent sure it wouldn't have the romantic connotation for Duncan that it did in the twenty-first century. Sure enough, he looked a little puzzled by the wording... but still pleased she'd said yes. She had to admit — she was honestly looking forward to spending more time with him, with getting to know him a little better. Not just because he was handsome and kind, and the way he looked at her made her heart beat hard... but because he knew this area well, traveling all over it.

And if she was ever going to find her way back home, she was going to need an ally who knew his way around.

Chapter 12

Helena had worried a little that she wouldn't be able to sleep that night, having spent such a big part of the afternoon and evening asleep. But it turned out she needn't have worried at all. After a long and very pleasant evening spent chatting with Duncan, who regaled her with a fair few hilarious stories about the rather intimidating men she'd met earlier over lunch — most of which rendered them a great deal less intimidating — she bid him goodnight and turned back to her bed, surprised to realize that she was yawning again, almost as tired as she had been that afternoon when she'd staggered up here to collapse into a much-needed nap.

Well, sleep was often a stress response, she knew that much. And rest was rarely a bad thing when it came to recovering from stressful times, from trauma and struggle, from the kind of hellish evening she'd had. She could afford to be kind to herself, to rest as much as her body wanted, to listen to what her intuition wanted her to do instead of letting her ego run the show. So, she settled into bed, tucked herself in nice and warm, and let herself drift off to sleep again.

This time, she slept the whole night through... and when she woke, she felt bright and refreshed in a way that she hadn't felt all of the previous day. Something told her that she'd turned a corner, here — that she'd begun to recover at least a little from what she'd been through. Still, she took it slow. No sense rushing and undoing all her recovery, just because she felt a little better this morning... she was still a little shaky, and there were aspects of her situation that she had a suspicion parts of her mind were still refusing to think about. Well, fair enough. She was always urging her patients to give themselves lots of time to get used to big changes, and what change could be bigger than this one?

She dressed quickly, wrinkling her nose a little at the feeling of putting on clothes that she'd already been wearing for what felt like two or three days... but it wasn't long before there was a knock on her door. Half expecting to see Duncan again, she called for them to come in, and was surprised by the appearance of a short woman in

an apron with an armful of fabric bundled up in her hands and a bright smile dancing in her cheery blue eyes.

"Um — good morning," she managed, her voice a little roughened from sleep.

"Good morning to you, madam! Brought you something to wear, if you'd like — thought you might like a change from those strange things you wore here. Most of the other ladies changed to gowns fairly quickly after they arrived — not that there's any pressure on you to do the same thing, love."

"Gowns?" Helena felt a little taken aback. She'd always been much more of a slacks-and-blouse kind of woman, with the occasional sundress for a special occasion. The prospect of wearing a gown was a little daunting. "I don't —"

But the servant woman seemed far ahead of her, chortling bright as she bustled over to her side. "Don't worry, love, I know that all you women don't have the first clue about these things. Let me teach you," she said firmly, dropping the fabric onto the bed that Helena had just finished making.

Sure enough, she could make out skirts, bodices, laces... a complicated array that she became more and more familiar with over the next twenty minutes as the woman, with the dexterity born of long practice, helped her haul herself into the gown.

Once, when Helena had been young, she'd gone along with her sister to a come-and-try ice hockey session. There, they'd been outfitted with what felt like a full suit of armor before they'd even been allowed on the ice. There had been shinpads, knee guards, a pair of shorts that were laden with padding, a kind of chest plate with shoulder pauldrons, elbow and forearm guards, a thick pair of gloves and a helmet to top it all off. And that whole process, feeling like a little sardine being jammed into a can, came to mind as the woman was bolting her into the gown... and when she looked at herself in the glass on the back of the wardrobe door, she couldn't help but laugh at herself a little.

"My whole shape's gone!" she couldn't help but say, shaking her head as she swished the skirts around a little. No sign of her legs, which she usually had on such clear display — either in leggings or tight jeans. Was it for modesty? she wondered. As if by contrast, the bodice of the dress was surprisingly revealing, with her breasts on full display. She'd always thought she'd dressed demurely... but maybe 'demure' had a different meaning in this era. Still, she didn't

exactly dislike the look of herself in the gown — there was something about the way the skirts bustled out that made her waist look rather narrow and dainty, and she grinned a little as she spun back and forth, admiring herself from all angles.

"You look lovely," the servant woman said brightly, looking at her with a satisfied glint in her eyes. "You'll be all ready to head down for breakfast, then?"

"Yes, thank you," Helena said with a smile. "For all of this — I think I should be alright to do it myself from now on."

"I'll stop by this evening to be sure," the woman said, eyes glinting with mirth. "Getting out of it again is a separate matter entirely."

"Ah. Good thought," Helena said with a grin.

Then the woman was gone with a cheery farewell, and after one last lingering look at herself in the mirror, she headed down for breakfast. Something about the good night of sleep and the gown just made her feel a lot more like she belonged here. Yesterday, she'd felt like a loose tooth. Today... today she felt like she might actually be able to hold a conversation.

That feeling, though, evaporated the minute she set foot in the dining hall. The minute she was there, she felt every head in the place swivel to fix her with a curious gaze... and though most of the faces she saw were friendly, she still felt herself freeze to the spot, panic and shyness taking over. Without a word, she turned on her heel and strode out of the hall again in a blind panic, not sure where she was heading for — just anywhere that people weren't staring at her... but before she could get far, she ran straight into an oddly familiar figure, bouncing off his chest with a yelp of surprise.

"Helena! Where are you going in such a rush?"

Sure enough, it was Duncan. He'd changed his clothes and seemed to have re-braided his dark red hair, and she took him in for a moment, distracted despite herself by how handsome he was. "Um. Hi. I — " She took a deep breath, trying to think of a more dignified explanation for what had just happened, and coming up empty-handed. "I got spooked in the dining hall and then I ran away and here I am."

He chuckled, then offered her his arm in an old-fashioned little gesture that couldn't help but make her laugh. "I see. May I escort you to breakfast, then?"

Walking in together was a lot less daunting... and she realized

that not that many people were looking at her, in the end. Duncan steered them to a quiet table on the far side of the hall and served them each a steaming bowl of what looked like oatmeal — though he seemed scandalized by her calling it that.

"Porridge, lass. If you're going to be one of us, you're going to use the proper words for things."

She grinned, but something was troubling her. "If I'm going to be one of you?"

"Like Laird Donal said," Duncan said seriously, looking at her across the table. "You're a member of the family now." But something in her face must have tipped him off that she found that suggestion a little uncomfortable, because he cleared his throat quickly and averted his eyes. "That is, if you want to be."

"I appreciate it, really I do," she said softly. "But — Duncan, I just got here. I don't even know how many floors this castle has. I'm a pretty far sight from being a member of the family."

"Well, we can fix that," Duncan said brightly, looking up at her as though he'd just found the solution to all the world's problems. "Why don't I show you around the castle?"

"Today?" She blinked, a little thrown by the suggestion. She'd planned to do a little wandering around by herself if she was honest... if she'd made much of a plan at all. But the prospect of wandering the castle alone was a little daunting, especially after her experience of utter panic at heading into the dining hall by herself. Maybe having a tour guide wouldn't be such a bad idea... but some old-fashioned idea of being polite asserted itself and she frowned a little. "Aren't you busy? Messages to deliver..."

He shook his head firmly. "I've just come in from a week-long trip. I'm not going back on the road until they drive me out with cold steel. Unless you'd prefer to explore by yourself?"

The wistful look in his eyes was what sold her, and she shook her head, smiling as she accepted the offer.

In the end, it was a surprisingly pleasant day. She'd felt a little nervous about the prospect of wandering around the castle in her new clothing — she'd seen movies where corseted women fainted because of the restriction of air, but the more time she spent in the bodice and gown, the more she realized she was more than capable of taking full breaths whenever she needed to. Something to do with the style, maybe? The thing that the cheerful servant had laced her into didn't exactly feel like a corset... not that she was any kind

of expert, but she'd always thought those things had bone in them. This was just fabric — stiff fabric, but fabric nonetheless, and there was enough give in it that her breathing wasn't impeded.

And that was a good thing — because they spent a lot of time climbing up and down the spiral staircases of the castle. There were four staircases in total, and Duncan showed her all four, his own legs taking the steps easily as her much shorter ones labored to keep up. It was a good workout, though, and good company... and whether the endorphins had more to do with his winning smile or the vigorous exercise, Helena didn't know. All she knew was that when they finally reached the roof of the castle just before sunset, having spent the whole day exploring the interior of the castle while she begged and begged to be taken to the roof, she felt better than she'd felt since... well, since well before all the horrible business with Josh's father had taken place.

Duncan must have caught her frowning, because he reached out to touch her shoulder, an oddly intimate gesture in the confines of the stairwell. They'd just reached the top and were able to emerge onto the battlements of the castle roof — she fought back the grim expression she'd felt slip over her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Just thinking about something from back home," she said, not wanting to lie to him but also not particularly wanting to explain exactly how it was she'd died in the future.

"Something sad?" He tilted his head. "You looked far away."

"I suppose so," she said softly. It was sad, wasn't it, that she couldn't remember the last time she'd been this happy — this particular blend of ebullience and enthusiasm, this eagerness to get out onto the roof, was quite unusual for her. Sure, she always said that she enjoyed her life — she got a lot of fulfilment out of her work, she knew she was helping people... but if she was honest, she couldn't remember the last time she'd actually felt happy like this.

Strange. Something to file away for further reflection... but all thoughts of introspection vanished when Duncan lead her through the door and onto the roof of the castle.

Chapter 13

Helena's jaw dropped as the view hit her, and she all but floated to the edge of the battlements up here, where a waist-high wall was all that would stop her plummeting from the top of the castle into the depths of the Loch beneath her.

"I can see now why you asked if I was scared of heights," she called back to him, the wind whipping at her hair and pulling her voice out of her mouth too. It was chilly up here, this close to sunset, with the majority of the sun's heat gone — she was glad that a shawl had been included with her donated collection of clothes and made a note to thank the woman warmly when she saw her later that night to unlace her.

"Not a bad view, is it?" Duncan moved up beside her, his body warm in the cold night air, a smile dancing across his face as he put an arm around her shoulders and drew her in, as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Helena fought the urge to freeze, took a few deep, steady breaths, and relaxed into the embrace, trying to pretend her heart was beating hard as a result of the exhilaration of the view, not the touch. But if she was really honest, both things were in play right now. Maybe one more than the other...

"The Loch really does go on forever," she said softly, staring out over the waves. A sudden thought occurred to her, a picture from an old children's book she'd had as a child, and she giggled aloud. "I don't suppose the Monster's out there somewhere, watching us?"

"She's probably asleep, actually," Duncan said, so calmly that she shot him a suspicious glance. Was he messing with her? "Though she does wake up around sunset to start her patrols. Keep an eye out," he said, grinning.

She stared back at him. "You're messing with me."

"I'm not," he said simply, raising an eyebrow. "What, you're willing to accept time travel, magic and witches, but the most famous resident of Loch Ness is out of the question?"

"I — I —" She felt a little faint... but then, to her surprise, she realized that her reaction was joy, not trepidation or feeling

overwhelmed. "There's an actual — dinosaur down there?" Wasn't that the usual theory about the Loch Ness Monster — that it was some kind of ancient dinosaur that had somehow survived to the present day?

"Nellie's a Fae creature," Duncan said with a shake of his head. "She keeps us safe. Minds the passageway between the Sidhe's world and our own."

"The passageway?"

He looked at her. "The Burgh's in the depths of the Loch. Quite close to the castle, actually — which is why it's here, after all."

She felt a little taken aback, but Duncan was chuckling at her.

"Sorry, I thought I'd told you. Why else did you think you came out of the Loch?"

"I just thought they were —" She blinked. "If the passageway is at the bottom, how did I get to the surface?"

Duncan grinned. "My theory is that Nellie helps our lost women to the surface. Nancy swears Nellie helped her out and feeds her occasionally."

"You mean — it carried me to the surface when I was unconscious?" The image was startling... but she had to admit, there was something rather delightful about the idea that the Loch Ness Monster herself had saved her life. "I better say thanks."

"You can give the message to Maggie tomorrow," Duncan said brightly. "I've arranged for us to visit. She's interested to meet you. Always is."

"Who's Maggie?"

"The expert I mentioned. She's an old lady who lives in a cottage halfway between the Keep and the village. Our strongest ally in the fight to keep the land safe."

Helena tilted her head, intrigued by that. "To keep it safe? Safe from what? You mentioned the Monster patrols the passageway... if the Sidhe are friends, what's the problem with things coming through from their world?"

"Because it's not just the Sidhe who have access to the Burgh," Duncan said grimly, a shadow crossing his face. "Unfortunately, the Fae are a lot like us — there are good men as well as bad men in this world. And in turn... well."

She felt a chill run down her spine. The view was so beautiful, but something about it had soured, her mind turning to the gateway that lay beneath the choppy dark waters. What kind of horrible

monsters came creeping out of the gateway to plague the locals? She didn't want to know, not right now. It had been such a hard fight to get to a place where she was at least roughly okay with what was going on — she had a suspicion that if she tried to heap more bad news onto her already fragile mind, she'd be running the very real risk of messing up her fragile mental health. Overwhelming herself, retreating into the kind of dissociative stupor that had almost taken her clear away when she'd first gotten here...

Duncan seemed to sense her discomfort — she could feel him squeezing her tightly against his side, the warmth of his body very reassuring in the chilly night air. Then he turned, pulling her gently with him as they headed back across the rooftop toward the door that would take them back inside. Helena followed, feeling an odd sense of relief as she finally tore her eyes from the choppy surface of the waves of Loch Ness. To think that down there somewhere was an enormous monster, a creature of legend... part of her still suspected that Duncan was messing with her. She'd once spent an evening with an Australian woman in a bar who swore black and blue that there were creatures called 'drop bears' in Australia, savaged toothed beasts that fell from trees and devoured their hapless prey... a complete fabrication, Helena had learned when she'd gotten home that night and looked it up online, and a kind of national running joke that Australians enjoyed inflicting on foreigners. Was the Loch Ness Monster something similar?

No, she thought, remembering the serious look that had crossed Duncan's face when he'd told her about the Burgh, about the way the creature guarded them from monsters that came creeping through. No, she had a suspicion that Duncan was telling her the truth on this one. And that knowledge sent a shiver running down her spine even as they headed back into the warm embrace of the castle.

But thankfully, it wasn't long until a distraction presented itself. There was a mysterious grin on Duncan's face as they headed downstairs toward the dining hall for dinner, and she kept shooting him curious glances that he was pointedly ignoring, saying something about there being a special table for Helena tonight. Her eyes widened when they entered the Hall — she had a sense, almost immediately, that she knew what he was talking about. There, at one of the low tables, sat a whole cluster of women in gowns — all

of them wearing identical expressions of eager enthusiasm as they turned as one group to look at her.

"I told you they'd be keen to meet you," Duncan said with a grin, speaking in a low voice into her ear.

Helena felt an odd wash of shyness crash over her as Duncan led her across the hall to the table of women. She'd always been a little hesitant when it came to meeting new people... and all these women looked so beautiful in their gowns, as though they'd been born to wear them. She glanced down at her own gown, biting her lip — then braced herself, annoyed with herself for being so afraid.

"Ladies," Duncan said brightly as they approached the table, sketching a deep bow. "May I introduce Helena Gray. Helena, this is —"

"We can do that part, Duncan," said the woman sitting at the head of the table, a bite of impatience in her voice as her bright eyes took in Helena. "You run along and play with the men, now."

Helena's eyes widened as she realized, belatedly, what was so different about the woman's voice. Over the last two days she'd grown accustomed to the thick Scottish accents sported by the residents of the castle... but this woman's vowels were undeniably American. She was petite, with shoulder-length brown hair and a pair of deep brown eyes, and the tone in her voice was undeniably authoritative when she invited Helena to take the empty seat beside her.

"It's so good to meet you," she said warmly, reaching out to clasp Helena's hand in her own. "My name's Anna Grant."

"You're American," Helena said, feeling a bit stupid for pointing out the obvious.

Anna chuckled. "We all are. It seems the Sidhe have a fondness for the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Helena looked up and down the table, at all the expectant faces. Sitting opposite her was a bright-eyed blonde woman with green eyes. "We're from all over the country, though. I'm from North Carolina, originally," she said with a grin.

"Go Hurricanes," Helena said faintly, dredging up a memory from her sister's short-lived but passionate obsession with the NHL.

The blonde's green eyes widened with delight and she clapped her hands together. "Oh, I like you! I'm Nancy," she said brightly. "God, I miss hockey. Do you follow it? Who's your team? Who won the most recent Stanley Cup —"

"Nancy," the woman sitting on the blonde's left side said, a weariness in her voice that made Helena hide a smile. "Let's get through the introductions first, shall we? I'm Elena Grant. I'm from Baltimore, originally." She had a long red braid, gray eyes, and an aloof energy. This woman gave off a kind of withdrawn vibe, which didn't stop Helena from getting the impression that she was watching everything very closely. "This is Helen —"

A round-faced woman with brown hair gave Helena a little wave.

"Next to her is Kay —"

A woman with raven-black hair waved.

"—and that's Karen, Julia, and Melanie."

"You introduced us in order of arrival," Melanie said with a grin. She had bright green eyes and dark brown hair pinned up on top of her head.

Helena took in the group for a moment, trying not to feel too overwhelmed.

"Don't worry," the redhead sitting beside Melanie said with a conspiratorial little smile — Julia, Elena had said her name was. "It took me a while to get everyone's name right. We're fast becoming quite a club, huh?"

"We're going to need two tables if we continue at this rate," Karen said, shaking her head with a smile. "You're very welcome, Helena. How are you finding the transition?"

"Um," Helena said carefully, drawing a chuckle from the assembled women. There was something, though, about the kindness on their faces, the sympathy... somehow, it was abundantly clear that all these women had been through exactly what she was going through. "Pretty weird, huh?"

"That's one word for it," Anna said with a grin.

"Tell us about it," Nancy broke in, having clearly run to the end of her ability to sit quietly — Helena saw the slender, gray-eyed woman at her side roll her eyes a little, and hid another grin. "How did you get here? What was happening?"

"I just... woke up in the lake," she said softly, thinking back to the chaotic proceedings that had brought her to this strange place. "If I'm honest I still think I'm dreaming."

"Yeah, so did I," Melanie said with a laugh. "I think it was at least a month before I shook the little voice in the back of my head that was telling me that all of this was a dream, or a hallucination,

or..."

"Or some kind of trauma response," Helena filled in with a grimace. "A psychotic break."

"That's what I thought for a good while," Karen said, nodding. "Didn't help that I was feverish and delusional for a few days before I — well, before the Sidhe brought me here."

The women exchanged looks at that, meaningful looks, and Helena frowned a little, wondering what had prompted the sudden somber atmosphere. "You were sick?" she asked, trying to be polite.

Karen nodded, but there was a look in her eyes that told Helena that they were onto a serious subject. "Very sick. Dying, in fact," she added carefully.

Helena could feel the women looking closely at her, as if trying to gauge her response. She felt a flash of the memory of crashing over the cliff, the pure terror she'd felt, the bone-deep knowledge that she was about to die...

"That's why the Sidhe brought me here. Part of it, anyway."

Helena frowned, a suspicion rising in her chest. "I was — definitely in danger, the last thing I remember," she said carefully, not especially wanting to revisit that trauma in front of this audience of near-strangers. Friendly near-strangers, yes, near-strangers who were possibly the only people in this world who were capable of understanding what she'd been through... but they were still strangers. She was going to keep her cards close to her chest. "Is that a common factor?"

Again, they all exchanged glances... and Helena felt a grim certainty slide into place as Anna nodded. "That's right," she said gently. "The major thing we have in common is that before the Sidhe brought us here... we were all in deadly situations."

Chapter 14

Helena could feel her heart beating hard in her chest, as though her body was bringing back some of the trauma that she'd been through in the car that night, that horrible encounter that felt at once like it had been years ago... and seconds. "All of you?" she said softly, looking up and down the table.

Anna nodded.

"You tell it, Anna," Elena said softly, her eyes shadowed. "We don't have to... we don't have to do show-and-tell."

"Right. The quick version," Anna said, shaking her head.

Helena bit her lip. "You don't have to — tell me. I mean, I'd like to know, but if it's hard on you... I don't want anyone revisiting unresolved trauma on my account."

Anna gave her a smile, tilting her head a little quizzically. "Are you a shrink?"

"Child psychologist," Helena confirmed, smiling a little. "Was it that obvious?"

"Cool," Nancy said thoughtfully. "Don't think we have a psychologist yet. Well, Karen's a doctor, that's kinda close."

"Epidemiologist," Karen clarified, a smile dancing across her face. "Not quite the same field."

"I'd much rather know what you do than what near-death experience brought you here, actually," Helena said firmly, looking up and down the table at the group. If she was honest, she didn't really want to hear such a grim list of stories... and if she was really, properly honest, the truth was that she didn't want to share her own. Sharing it would mean revisiting it, and she didn't trust herself not to burst into tears. Vulnerability was something to be valued and admired, sure, but... well, it could wait until they knew each other a little better, as far as she was concerned.

"Alright, everyone get your resumes out," Nancy said brightly, her eyes dancing. "Helena, you get to award a prize to the most and least useful career choices for time travel, okay? Take notes."

"Nancy," Elena said with a sigh. "Don't —"

"What? I'm just trying to lighten the mood a little."

"I think I win least useful," Julia broke in, her curly red hair dancing around her face as she leaned forward. "I was a wildlife photographer. My camera even made it through with me," she said with a grin. "Though it didn't survive its dip in the Loch, unfortunately."

Helena winced sympathetically. "I bet it's hard to find film in the sixteenth century."

"Very," Julia agreed, grinning. "Still. I find ways to keep myself busy."

"I think I can do you one better," Nancy said firmly. "I was a SCUBA instructor."

Helena couldn't help but laugh. "Also very tech-dependent. But I guess being a strong swimmer would be useful around here."

"That's true," Nancy allowed. "I'll give you that. Who's next?"

"The cops," Anna said with a grin. "Elena was a Baltimore homicide detective, Melanie was a private investigator, and Helen used to work with the FBI. Karen you already know was a doctor — an infectious disease specialist. It came in handy, hey?"

"Very much so," Karen said drily. "We had an outbreak of cowpox in the village when I first got here... with a supernatural component, of course, just to keep things exciting. Kay helped, of course," she added, nodding across the table to the other woman. "Kay was a vet tech in Wyoming. I think she wins the prize for most useful, honestly. She's been a Godsend to the local farmers and herdsman."

Helena's eyes widened. "Duncan was just telling me about — about the bad stuff that comes through the Burgh along with... well, along with all of us. Is that what you mean by supernatural component?"

"Yep," Karen said grimly. "Nasty things come through all the time, that's for certain. Just hope nothing accompanied you."

A chill ran down her spine. "Could that have happened?"

"We haven't heard anything yet," Anna said firmly, giving Karen a warning look down the table. "There's no reason to suspect that anything's wrong. Donal's keeping a close eye, of course, but as yet... no news is good news. I was in the military," she added briskly, turning back to Helena with the distinct energy of someone who was determined to keep the subject light. "I taught self-defense, too, once I retired from active duty. But the most useful thing I did, honestly, I thought was just a hobby."

Helena tilted her head curiously. "And what was that?"

Anna grinned. "Learned to fight with a broadsword."

The table laughed, and Helena shook her head, thoroughly impressed with the cohort. "I guess I'm in impressive company," she said softly, looking up and down the table. "I'm glad to meet you — glad to know you all."

"We're your sisters now," Nancy said firmly, reaching across the table to grab her hand firmly. "It's a hell of an adjustment, coming through the Burgh. When you feel alone, or lost, or sad, or crazy... any one of us will drop everything to be with you if that's what you need. Okay?"

Solemn nods from all the other women followed her assurance.

Helena felt a little put on the spot... but she squeezed Nancy's hand, grateful for the offer. "Thank you. Really. I think I just — at this point, I just need time to adjust."

"Absolutely," Elena said softly. "Sometimes I think I still need time."

That left an eerie silence... and Helena hastened to fill it, not wanting the mood to drop too low. "I do have a question, actually."

"Shoot," Julia said brightly. "We're all experts now."

"Except me," Melanie said drily. "I've only been here for a couple of months."

"Duncan was saying... well, I met a lot of the Grant men on my first afternoon here, and from what they were saying, all eight of you..." She hesitated, not wanting to sound too judgmental, but feeling a little ridiculous about the sentence she was framing. "All of you married Grant men."

A series of nods. Elena in particular looked a little amused — a rare smile crossed her solemn face and Helena wondered very much what she was thinking. But it was Anna who spoke. "Pretty weird, huh?"

She felt herself relax a little at the looks of amusement on the women's faces. Part of her had been worried they'd think she was rude for pointing it out. "I thought it was ridiculous when I got here," Melanie said drily. "Thought they were all in a cult."

"Then you married one too," Julia said brightly. "One of us! One of us!"

"It's got something to do with the Sidhe, that's my theory," Kay said softly.

Helena leaned forward, interested in this new line of argument.

Duncan hadn't mentioned anything about the connection between the Sidhe and the curious pattern of time-travelers marrying into Clan Grant.

"They bring back women whose lives are threatened, that much we know. But there are only nine of us. More women than that die every day. So, there's something else at play, right?"

"I think they bring back women who are going to be useful in the struggle against some Unseelie plot," Karen said firmly. "They brought me when the cowpox outbreak was looming, they brought Kay when the locals needed an animal expert..."

"And ... how do I put this without it sounding ridiculous?" Anna said, shaking her head. "They ... no, there's no way of making it seem any less daft than it is. They play matchmaker."

It did sound ridiculous... but the chorus of agreement from the other women made Helena take the prospect seriously. "Matchmaker? Like — they select women who... who they think are romantically compatible with Grant men?"

"And deliver them like prizes," Elena said drily. "I know, it doesn't sound especially... progressive. But I can't deny that I love my husband dearly. We're all —"

"Disgustingly happy," Nancy broke in with a grin. "Malcolm's perfect. Honestly, I wouldn't change a hair on his head."

Helena remembered the smiling, handsome young man who'd sat at Laird Donal's side, making the connection with a smile. It didn't surprise her at all — these two seemed perfectly suited to one another. But the knowledge that it may have been the Sidhe who'd played matchmaker did make her frown a little. "Doesn't that feel... strange? To know you're having your romantic life manipulated?"

Anna sighed. "I mean — we're always in the hands of fate anyway, aren't we? Just because we have a name for it now, doesn't mean we've got any more or less control over who we fall in love with, who we end up with..." She smiled softly. "And Donal's my soulmate, plain and simple."

"Who was the first person you met when you arrived?" Nancy asked, a deliberately innocent tone in her voice — and Elena shot her a sharp look.

"Nancy, don't —"

"It's okay," Helena said, grinning a little. "I mean, why not address the elephant in the room, right? It was Duncan."

The women nodded thoughtfully, exchanging meaningful

glances with one another.

Helena rolled her eyes. "I mean, don't go planning the wedding yet, or anything —"

"Of course not." That was Melanie, looking serious. "Matchmaking supernatural beings or not, nobody's going to make you do anything, Helena. You don't owe him anything. You don't have to see him ever again if you don't want to —"

She couldn't help but laugh at that. "No! No, he's fine, he..." She cleared her throat. "He saved my life, actually."

A widening of eyes along the table. She could tell that they were all fighting hard not to find this romantic, and that knowledge couldn't help but make her grin.

"I was just about to drown in the lake, I think, and he came splashing in to pull me out. Warmed me up by the fire, gave me his cloak to sleep in... it was all very dramatic. Then we rode back to the Keep. He's — a good friend," she said softly, trying not to think too much about the mild crush she'd been unsuccessfully battling. "At least, for someone I've only known for a couple of days. Do you think the Sidhe want us to —"

"The Sidhe can want whatever they want," Elena said sharply, a shadow passing across her face. "Don't feel that you're beholden to them, Helena. Your life is your own, your choices are your own."

"Within the context of medieval Scotland, that is," Helena said drily. She took a deep breath. "So — if I wasn't here, I'd be dead. Is that the long and short of it?"

A solemn group nod proceeded her statement.

She took a deep breath. "Well. Thanks for being honest with me, at least."

"Always," Anna said softly. "We're your sisters in this, Helena. You can always count on us for answers."

"Duncan said something about going to see an expert on all this," she said, feeling a strange urge to change the subject as the intensity on Anna's face grew a little overwhelming. "A woman named Maggie?"

The name seemed to be well known — the women along the table all grinned, exchanging knowing glances with each other. "Oh, yes. Maggie's very much beloved around here," Anna said with a grin. "I'm glad you're going to meet her."

"She's definitely an expert," Nancy agreed. "Knows everything there is to know about the Fae and the Sidhe..."

"Not that that guarantees she'll tell you everything she knows, of course," Elena said drily. "Take her a present, that's my advice. She likes mead. Mead and Blair's shortbread. I doubt she eats anything else, honestly."

The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly. The nine of them ate their meal and chatted — well, the other eight chatted. Helena characteristically found herself taking on a listening role, sitting back, absorbing what the other women were saying rather than contributing too much herself, getting to know them through the way they spoke, the way they laughed, the way they exchanged quick glances, the intensity with which they listened... and as she did so, she could sense Elena doing the same, quiet, thoughtful, observant. What had happened to the woman? she wondered. There was something about her that suggested she'd experienced something... something otherworldly. She got a similar impression from Julia at the other end of the table, strangely enough. Some kind of brush with the supernatural... something beyond what could be explained by their collective journey through the Burgh to this place.

But right now, she wasn't interested in prying for deeper stories. She was just happy to be here, surrounded by people who'd experienced what she'd experienced, eating good food and feeling safe and protected. There would be plenty of time in the coming weeks to learn, to dig into what exactly the forces were that had brought her and these other women to this strange place, who had changed their lives so radically, plunged them into lifestyles that they'd never anticipated or expected... but ones that had brought them a great deal of happiness.

For now, though, she took heart in how happy these women were. Because if such a disparate group could find joy and fulfilment here, maybe she could too. At least, that was what she was going to keep telling herself. The good thing about telling yourself a story over and over was that pretty often, that could make it come true.

Chapter 15

Despite their conversation going late into the night, Helena still found herself waking bright and early the next day, feeling rested and energized by her night of sleep. Strange, how well she slept in this place. Was it the lack of traffic sounds? The nights were hardly quiet — she could always hear the sounds of the Loch down below, the quiet lapping of the waves, and the low murmurs of the folk of the castle going about their errands... but somehow, she was sleeping better than she ever had. Something to do with the fresh air, perhaps. Or could it be a little parting gift from the Sidhe, a way to ease her way into her new life? Impossible to say. She knew so little about them, these otherworldly figures who had brought her here, who may or may not have also been playing matchmaker... and Helena realized that there was curiosity itching at her more sharply than ever before.

So, she was delighted when Duncan came to find her just after breakfast, a broad smile on his face. He was dressed for riding, and when her eyes widened a little as she put the pieces together, he nodded enthusiastically.

"It's a fine day and Maggie's sent word that she's willing to tolerate guests, so if you're ready to go —"

Helena blinked. "Willing to tolerate?"

Duncan chuckled. "Aye, that's how Maggie frames her warmer invitations. You ought to hear the language she uses when she'd not particularly interested in seeing somebody..."

So, they headed out to the stables together to collect a couple of horses after Helena insisted that she'd be fine to ride by herself. Not that she didn't like the idea of riding a horse with Duncan close behind her, his strong arms wrapped around her to take the reins like something straight out of a romance novel... but the prospect made her heart flutter and her pulse pound in her ears, and she knew that she would need a clear head for the meeting today. As they led the horses out, though, she hesitated.

"Oh, shoot. Someone last night mentioned we should bring a gift to Maggie — they said she likes shortbread and —"

"Mead," Duncan finished for her, a broad grin on his face as he tapped the satchel slung around his waist. "Good thinking, Helena, but I'm way ahead of you this time."

They climbed aboard their horses, Helena needing a little boost to get her short frame off the ground and onto the friendly chestnut gelding that she'd been allocated, and before long they were riding across the courtyard. She couldn't help but think back to the afternoon she'd arrived here, how utterly taken aback she'd been by everything she was seeing, how convinced she'd been that it was all a hallucination... did she still think that? she wondered, prying gently at her own thoughts. No, she realized with a soft smile. That suspicion was fading... slowly, but it was indeed fading, thankfully. The evidence was growing rapidly insurmountable that she was really here. The air against her skin, the warmth of the horse between her legs, the way Duncan's smile flashed in the weak morning sunlight as he turned back to make sure she was behind him... this was no dream.

And part of her was glad of that, looking at Duncan as they headed out through the gate together.

It was quite a short ride, in the end — she'd been anticipating a marathon, especially after the long ride that had brought them to the Keep from the campsite where he'd brought her after pulling her out of the water. They were riding in the opposite direction than they'd come from, and Duncan assured her it was only half an hour or so, barely anything in the broader scheme of things. Sure enough, it wasn't long before they came upon a little cottage that was set in the treeline, almost swallowed by the forest. It had a thatched roof and a little porch out the front on which an old wooden rocking chair was set, looking out over the waters of the Loch. It was beautiful, and charming, and rustic... and absolutely the kind of thing that would spring to mind if you tried to imagine a witch's cottage.

Duncan must have sensed her hesitation, because he gave her a reassuring smile as they hopped down from their horses, tethering them to an old tree that stood in the front yard of the cottage. "You'll like Maggie," he told her firmly. "She's a bit of a character, but she's got a heart of gold. Remember that."

And with that slightly ominous warning, the two of them strode up to the front door of the cottage. But as Duncan raised one hand to knock on the door, Helena drew in a sharp breath of shock — the

door swung open, revealing... nobody. What? Then she looked down — and gasped again as she realized her mistake.

There, standing in the doorway, barely clearing four and a half feet, was what looked like an ambulatory pile of rags with a couple of points of light boring out from the top part of it. Helena took a breath as she tried to refocus her eyes, and the meaning of the shape abruptly coalesced. Not a pile of rags at all, but a roughly humanoid figure... wearing so many layers of ratty, tattered clothing that its shape was completely distorted. And up the top — it was the figure's eyes, shining out through a face that looked more like a nest of wrinkles than a face. Piercing, sharp blue eyes, intense and watchful — and focused directly on Helena herself. She met that gaze, worried already that she'd been rude, that her expression of shock would insult this strange creature... but then, surprising her again, the figure threw back its head and cackled.

"It's been a while since I've startled someone with that old trick! Saw you both coming through the window," she said, her voice thin and reedy like an old woman's — though there was a surprising volume and strength to it, as though it had been amplified by some invisible means. "You must be Helena Gray, our newest stray."

"That's right," she said, forcing a smile onto her face. "And you're Maggie?"

"Old Maggie's fine," the woman cackled. "I know that's what they call me, and it's true, so why would I take offence? And what have you got for me, Duncan Grant?"

"Nothing," Duncan said, drawing a quick glance of surprise from Helena — but then a grin split across his face and Maggie roared laughter again, snatching the satchel from his unprotesting hands and hastening off into the cottage with it.

"Well? Are you two coming in or not?"

What a strange woman, Helena thought faintly, following Duncan into the tiny, cramped little cottage. It felt like the place was absolutely chock full of furniture. There were armchairs, couches, seemingly enough seating for a dozen people, all crammed into a living area that was barely big enough for two, using the cottage's little hearth as a central point of focus. Scattered around the space, too, were dozens of bookshelves and tables and cabinets, storage for what Helena was realizing were herbs, poultices, strange and unfamiliar liquids, and powders in little glass jars...

She was standing in a real-life witch's cottage. But the surprises

weren't going to end there.

Maggie shuffled them both onto a small, low couch which was quite soft and comfortable, even if it did sag in the middle in a way that made the two of them lean rather close to each other... not that Helena minded that at all, if she was truly honest. More closeness to Duncan could only be a good thing, as far as she was concerned. Maggie sat by them in a squashed armchair that seemed to perfectly fit the contours of her body, rummaging enthusiastically through Duncan's satchel to withdraw a bundle wrapped in soft brown cloth and tied with string. With a cackle of triumph, she unlaced it with surprising dexterous fingers and the cloth unfolded to reveal a small mountain of golden-brown shortbread.

"Blair sends her regards, as always," Duncan said with a smile.

Maggie grunted her agreement, mouth already full of shortbread. Helena took a moment to look around the cottage, curious about the herbs and tinctures she could see on every available surface, and a flash of movement caught her eye. A flash of fur, an ear... did Maggie have a cat? That would be very on-brand... but then she fought a scream. That was no cat. What the hell was she looking at?

The creature was maybe two or three feet tall, if that — the height of a small child. For a moment she thought she was looking at a *Sesame Street* monster. It had furry ears like a horse's, perched atop its head, but the rest of its body was gray and scaley, with one webbed hand that was resting uncertainly on the edge of the bannister of the stairs that led up into the cottage's second story. But there was an eerily human intelligence in its dark eyes... and as Helena's panic and shock receded a little, she realized with a shock that the creature was almost... cute.

Still, she'd gasped in shock when she'd first spotted it, and Maggie looked up with her mouth still full of shortbread, a disgruntled frown on her face.

"Darter Hob, either come into the room or bugger off," she said gruffly.

Helena watched in shock as the creature tiptoed forward, those huge dark eyes darting between Helena and Duncan with clear curiosity. And then, if she wasn't shocked enough by the creature's presence — it spoke, in a high, sharp voice that made her eyes widen.

"Sorry. It's good to see you, Duncan."

"Hello, Darter." Duncan was smiling at the creature for all the world as though he was greeting a regular child. "How have you been? Keeping out of trouble?"

"He led the village children a merry chase the other day," Maggie said darkly, tossing a piece of shortbread to the creature — who reached up with uncanny speed to snatch the biscuit out of the air one-handed and ate it ravenously. Helena blinked, looking at the creature's other arm with confusion. It looked withered and shrunk and hung at his side as though it was dead. "All through town and almost into the depths of the Loch before they gave up and went home. He's going to be famous in folklore one of these days."

"Who's this?" the creature asked, its dark eyes turning to Helena.

She took a deep breath, trying to brace herself against the strangeness, against the urge to run and hide. Both Maggie and Duncan had greeted this creature like a person — and all evidence pointed to the fact that it was intelligent, sentient. Not a pet, but a friend.

"My name's Helena," she said softly, hearing herself use the voice she always used for new clients. That was a little embarrassing. Would the creature be insulted? He seemed about the height of a child, which was what had prompted her to speak to him like he was one — but she didn't know the first thing about him. For all she knew, he might be older than she was.

"I'm Darter," the creature replied, shuffling forward to extend his non-withered hand to her.

With a moment's hesitation, she reached out and took it in hers, surprised by how warm the scaly palm was, how oddly pleasant to the touch.

"Nice to meet you. Are you from the future, too?"

Such a frank question — it made her giggle a little, and what was undeniably a smile broke out across the creature's — *across Darter's*, she corrected herself — strange little face. He had sharp, pointed teeth — and as she looked at him, she saw something like gills at his throat. An aquatic creature, perhaps?

"I am," she confirmed with a nod. Well, at least that wasn't the strangest thing about this situation. Not any more. Not with this scaly little creature making polite small talk with the three of them. "I arrived a few days ago. Duncan pulled me out of the lake," she

added, grinning sideways at Duncan.

"Darter's from the other side of the Burgh, too," Maggie said as the little creature took a seat, sitting cross-legged in an arm chair that was far too large for him. "Speaking of which..." And her blue eyes gleamed as she turned the full force of her gaze onto Helena. "I imagine you've got a few questions. Now that the pleasantries are out of the way... what's say we get on with it, hmmm?"

Chapter 16

Helena took a deep breath. She'd prepared a list of questions, but the abrupt meeting with the strange little monster had quite cleared them out of her head, and she reached for the first one she could remember.

"What exactly are the Sidhe?"

Maggie chuckled, taking another piece of shortbread, and devouring it thoughtfully as she looked closely at Helena through those beady blue eyes. "Good question to start with. I like you. They always do choose the plucky ones, don't they?"

Duncan smiled at her as he nodded, and she tried to ignore the shiver it sent running down her spine. Right now, she had to focus on what Maggie had to say. She wished she had her notebook — or anything at all to write with — but thankfully, she'd had a lot of practice making sure she remembered the things that her patients said to her without having to stop a session to take notes. She just had to treat this conversation like a session with a patient, and then she'd remember what was said long enough to write it down once they were back at the Keep.

"First, you need to understand that there are two courts in the Fae. Political factions, roughly speaking... though they're a great deal more complex than human politics. There are factions within factions within factions, thousands of different reasons for any two Fae to disagree... but very broadly speaking, you have the Seelie court... and the Unseelie court. The Sidhe are ... there's no equivalent in this daft language," Maggie said, clicking her tongue. "But the closest word is — royalty. They're in charge, in a manner of speaking, because everyone in the Seelie court agrees that they are. That doesn't mean they always will be, of course. Power is... different to the Fae. Slippery."

Helena nodded, trying to take all this in. "They're sort of — elected leaders, almost."

"Almost, but also, not at all," Maggie said with a flick of her wrist. "Just know that they're powerful."

"And they're — good?" Helena tried. "Where the Unseelie

aren't?"

"Good and evil are also human words with no counterpart in the Fae," Maggie said dismissively. "A better way to think of it is that the Seelie Fae are sympathetic to humans, willing to work with us — and the Unseelie are not."

She hesitated. This question wasn't actually on her list, but it had come up in the course of the conversation so far, and though part of her was worried that it would be rude to ask, the other part of her was so fiercely curious that she couldn't resist. "And are you... a Fae, or a human?"

Maggie looked at her keenly for a long moment, a thoughtful, cryptic expression on her face. The silence stretched out for so long that Helena was all but convinced that she'd made a terrible mistake, that she'd offended her host, that she might be about to be kicked out of her cottage for good... but then Maggie chuckled, and when Helena snuck a glance sideways at Duncan, he was smiling, too. "Brave girl."

"I'm sorry if it's not — polite, to ask that," Helena said quickly, glancing from Darter's face to Maggie's. They both looked amused. "I'm still figuring everything out."

"It's not impolite. But not many are brave enough to risk it. The answer is both," Maggie said briskly. "I'm of two worlds. My father was human, my mother was... well, never you mind the exact details, but she was Fae through and through. I've spent time in both worlds, and I've settled here, on a bridge between them."

A *bridge*, Helena thought curiously. Not *the* bridge. Did that mean there were other Burghs out there, other gateways through time and space? Speaking of — that was a question she needed to get to. "This one might be complicated. How did the Sidhe bring me back through time?"

Maggie shrugged her shoulders. "Not complicated, just difficult to understand. The Fae are not governed by the same rules of time as the mortal realms, and the connections... well, the Burgh is a gateway that transports people in space as well as time, but it does so ... not in the way you'd think. I mean, imagine being an ant on a table. A person scoops you up and puts you down outside. The ant thinks it's been transported to a whole new world, a new universe. That's not true, of course. But its perspective is simply — limited."

"I think I understand," Helena said carefully.

"You don't. But that's alright." Maggie took another piece of

shortbread and settled back in her chair; bright eyes gleaming. "Clever questions so far. When will you get to the hard one?"

Helena froze. How did Maggie know she was holding a question in reserve, keeping it til last? Maggie's eyes were twinkling, and Helena shot a glance sideways at Duncan, who just shrugged his shoulder. Fear struck her heart. Was Maggie some kind of mind-reader? Duncan ought to have warned her if she was walking into the house of a telepath.

"No need to panic," Maggie said, chuckling. "All of you time-stranded strays get to the same question eventually — or have the others already answered it?"

"I didn't ask them," Helena said softly, a shadow passing over her face as she thought of the women that she'd met the night before. "I didn't want to... I mean, none of them —"

"None of them went back," Maggie agreed solemnly, suddenly seeming larger than her diminutive frame should suggest. "None of them mentioned the choice to stay. None of them mentioned a woman who'd come back then returned home. Now ask your question, Helena Gray."

"Is there a way back? Can I go home?" Her voice hardly sounded like her own, it was so breathless and hollow.

Duncan shot her a sharp glance, and she ignored it, forcing herself to stay calm, to keep her eyes focused on Maggie. It felt like a betrayal, in a way, a rejection of all his help and hospitality, and she couldn't help but feel guilt prickle at her. She'd have preferred to have asked Maggie this question in private. But now that the subject had been raised, she couldn't just let it go. Not now.

"No, lass." Maggie's voice was as brusque as it had been since they'd arrived, as though she'd asked something a little bit stupid and Maggie was being patient — the way an adult was always patient with a child's enquiries — but there was a glint of something very human in her eyes, a look of something that might almost have been sympathy... "You've taken a one-way journey, here."

"But — but the Sidhe brought me here through their Burgh," Helena said, feeling weak, knowing it was useless to argue but feeling the overwhelming need to do so anyway. "If they could take me from the future to the past, why couldn't they take me back —"

"Oh, they could," Maggie said, shocking Helena to her core. "They could take you to the future in a heartbeat."

"Then —"

"Of course," Maggie continued, steely-eyed, "they'd be taking you to your death."

She took a deep breath, a flash of the crash returning to haunt her field of vision for a second before she fought it down. "My death?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Maggie leaned forward now, curious. "What happened to you, before you woke up in the Loch — or more likely, in a dark place surrounded by glowing figures?"

Her eyes widened. "How do you know about that?"

"That's how the Sidhe appear — to humans, at least," Maggie said with a flick of her hand. "Easy enough to guess that you must have encountered them. But before that? What did you see? What was happening to you?"

"I was driving," she said softly, aware that she hadn't told this entire story to Duncan before — Duncan, who was sitting beside her on the couch, reassuring her with the warmth of his body, the gentle kindness of his attention. "I was driving to a nearby town to spend the weekend, because a man..." She took a deep breath. "The police were looking for a man who'd been threatening me. A man who'd hurt his son, a man who wanted to hurt me for telling the authorities what he'd been doing, for getting his child taken away from him."

"And?"

"And he was behind me, on the road. Following me. We were high up in the mountains, and he..." She took a deep, shuddering breath, shocked by how vivid the memory was, how much of an impact it was having on her body. She'd been on the other end of this kind of conversation countless times, watching a child relive a trauma as they told it to her. She was always moved to tears by their courage, by the conviction in their little bodies as they shook with relived fear. Now, she knew she had to be as brave as her patients always were. "He ran me off the road. I tried to get away, but I couldn't, and he sent my car careening over the edge of the cliff and down to the rocks below..."

"That's what waits for you," Maggie said, not unkindly, though her voice was sharp and no-nonsense. "That's the fate the Sidhe snatched you from. Those are the jaws they'd be delivering you back to if they took you from here and returned you to your old

time. The person you were in that world is dead, Helena Gray. Dead, buried, and mourned by all who knew you."

Helena stared at Maggie, not understanding. She looked down at her hands where they lay in her lap, raised them a little as if in evidence. "But I'm —"

"Trust me, lass. You're alive here, by their grace, but you're dead as a doornail there."

She took a deep, steadying breath. Duncan took her hand in his, unexpectedly — she glanced up at him and he gave her a quick smile, squeezed her hand. It was surprisingly reassuring, and when she looked back up at Maggie, her mind was calm.

"Do I owe them anything?"

A broad grin spread across Maggie's face at that. "Clever girl!" she crowed, shaking her head. "Good instinct. You owe them nothing. The gift of your life was a gift freely given. No contract, no terms."

Another deep breath. "And there's no way I can return."

"No." Maggie looked at her, raised an eyebrow. "Now answer an old woman's curiosity, in exchange for all my wisdom on this. What is it you'll miss?"

Helena looked up again, aware she'd been letting her emotions show on her face — the loss, the sadness, the disappointment, the knowledge that a crushing grief was coming that might just squash her flat once she let it catch up with her. "My work," she heard herself say, numbly. "I — there are a dozen children who need me. Who trust me. Some on the brink of breakthroughs, some just working through — " She took a deep, shuddering breath. "They'll have to be reassigned, have to build all-new relationships with all new therapists... it's such a long process. The loss they'll feel..."

Maggie clicked her tongue sympathetically. "Tough. Tough for the little ones. But take solace. There is no shortage of needy children around here who are crying out for some expert help."

Helena blinked. The idea of continuing her practice here hadn't actually occurred to her — or if it had, she'd quickly dismissed it. Psychology as a discipline hadn't really existed until the nineteenth century or thereabouts — the idea of bringing modern ideas to a medieval setting just ... well, she had a feeling that it wouldn't be welcome. But was Maggie telling her something different? "Would that be — useful? Welcome?"

"You'd have to be smart about it," Maggie said with a shrug. "But

I can think of a whole gaggle of youngsters who could do with some help. Orphans, children who've been through trauma... I mean, Darter here's among them, aren't you, lad?"

The creature started — he'd clearly been listening to the conversation, content not to be taking part, but the sound of his name made him squeak. "I'm not a kid," he said rebelliously.

Helena couldn't help but cover a laugh.

"What?"

"I just hear that a lot," she said softly, shaking her head. "Mostly from kids."

"How old are you, Darter?"

"I'm — goblins don't keep track of age," he grumbled, and she felt an odd thrill run down her spine at the rather fantastical word. "I'm nearly grown."

"He's a kid," Maggie said, rolling her eyes. "An adult wouldn't be nearly so cagey."

"I'm not traumatized," Darter said impatiently. "I just have a weird arm."

"What happened?" Helena asked, tilting her head to the side. Usually, she wouldn't be so blunt about visible injuries, but Darter had raised the subject, and there was something about the sidelong glance he shot her that told her he wanted to tell the story.

Sure enough, there was a flash of excitement on his face, and he took a deep breath before settling in to tell the story. She watched his body language, amused. Age or no age, this goblin was a child and no mistake. A supernatural creature he might be, but there was something universal about the excitement with which he settled into his story.

And Helena had had plenty of experience with listening to kids' stories. This, at least, was something that made her feel right at home.

Chapter 17

"A while ago, I was in a gang of goblins. Really bad guys," Darter said, eyes glowing like the embers of the fire in the hearth. "An Unseelie band who were determined to come through the Burgh and steal and loot and cause havoc in the human world. We were pretty tough," he said, puffing his chest out a little. "Everyone was scared of us — especially the leader, Grimtooth. He was a Redcap, and he was the toughest guy in town."

"Tell them what happened to your arm, Darter." Maggie didn't seem too impressed by the little goblin's posturing.

Helena hid a smile at the familiar tone of quiet impatience in her voice. She'd heard that tone from family members before. Maggie was fond of this goblin — fond like family, no matter how gruff she might want to appear.

"Grimtooth made me dive to the bottom of the Loch with a piece of iron," he said softly, his eyes dark. "He wanted me to wedge the door to the Burgh open with the iron so that hundreds and thousands of goblins could pour through and take over the town."

Helena had a feeling she was missing something. Duncan had taken a sharp breath in through his teeth and was shaking his head, and even Maggie looked a little unwell.

"And what happened?" she pressed when it seemed that the story was over. "Did you get your arm caught in the door?"

"It was made of *iron*," Darter said blankly, staring at her as though she was stupid.

Maggie clicked her tongue. "Did you really not tell the girl anything, Duncan? Shame on you."

"Forgive me, Maggie. Iron does great damage to Faerie creatures," Duncan said, giving Maggie a properly shamed look before turning to Helena. "Even a light touch is enough to burn their skin and weaken them greatly. Holding an iron bar for an extended period of time... well, you can see what happened."

Darter held his ruined arm out, his eyes serious. She looked, surprised by how withered and shriveled the arm was, especially compared to his other arm, which by contrast was strong and

hearty, with sharp little talons on the tip of each slender figure. "You poor thing," she said softly. "It must have hurt, huh?"

"So much," he said, eyes shadowed.

"You were brave," she told him. "Very brave. So brave that you got hurt. A useful lesson, maybe?"

"I think so," Darter said softly. "I'm never going to trust an Unseelie goblin again. They told me that the humans were our enemies, but it was a human who saved me. Nancy Grant," he added.

Helena's eyes widened, remembering the cheerful girl who'd chatted so brightly the night before.

"She helped me, saved me from the other goblins when they tried to hurt me worse. Then she swam down and saved the mortals by taking the iron away from the Burgh."

"And ever since, Darter's been a friend," Duncan said with a smile, reaching over to touch the little goblin gently on the shoulder. "A Seelie goblin."

The little creature puffed his chest out, clearly proud of this designation, and Helena smiled.

"It's all about choices, isn't it?" Maggie was watching her, eyes thoughtful.

Helena couldn't help but wonder what the woman was thinking. She had a suspicion that a lot of people wondered that about Maggie. She sighed. "I'm wondering if I made a dumb choice, leaving town like I did. I was hoping I'd be safe in another town, but all it did was give that jerk the opportunity to attack me with nobody around to stop him."

"Waste of time, blaming yourself for the actions of a monster," Maggie said dismissively.

"It just sucks that I can't go back. Feels like he won. Although," she added thoughtfully, thinking back. "I have a feeling his car came off the cliff with mine."

Maggie cackled. "Serves him right."

But Helena felt an old worry return, stirred to the surface of her mind by all this talk of monsters coming through the Burgh, of unpleasant people finding their way to the shore of the Loch...

"Is it possible that he's here too, somewhere?" she wondered aloud, frowning. "I mean, if the Sidhe snatched me out of the wreck, what if they took him, too? He might have swam ashore somewhere else. Maybe he's in the village, or something —"

But Maggie was laughing uproariously, and she felt her worries begin to fade. "The idea!" she gasped. "The Sidhe, saving a child abuser!"

Even Duncan was chuckling, a surprisingly dark look on his face. Helena felt, not for the first time that day, like she was missing something.

"What —"

"The Sidhe are famous for their fondness for children," Duncan explained with a soft smile. "It's one of the things people here know about them... that, and their odd sense of humor."

"You'll frequently find the children of abusive homes lured out into the woods," Maggie added, her eyes dancing. "Called away to be with the fairies... human folk stories tend to frame this as some kind of awful tragedy, but the truth is that every child who's lured into the woods by the Seelie Fae is lured because they're in an abusive home. The Sidhe deliver them safe and sound to a new family, a new home, someone who'll love them the way a child ought to be loved... but of course, no abuser's happy with that being the way the story's told, so the Fae are always framed as villainous tricksters."

"Fascinating," Helena said softly, thinking of the potential ramifications of a kind of otherworldly Child Protective Services being on call. "So, a man who hit his children..."

"If anything, the Sidhe would make sure he was dead," Maggie said grimly. "Your murderer will never see the light of day again. You, on the other hand, can build a whole life here if you're tough enough."

Helena smiled, grateful for the encouragement. They stayed a little longer, chatting idly about things that were going on in the village... but Helena found herself lapsing into a brooding silence as she began to process everything she'd learned from Maggie. It was good to receive some concrete information about the Sidhe who'd brought her here, about who they were and what they wanted... but at the same time, she felt overwhelmed by her new knowledge. So, they'd brought her here because she was dead in her own time. That meant her family, her friends, her sister Julia... they were all going to think she'd been murdered by that guy. They'd all be mourning her, grieving her death... she felt tears prickle at her eyes at how powerless she was, stuck so far in the past, unable to let them know that she was okay, that she'd survived, and he hadn't,

that it was her and not him who had won...

Maggie kicked them out unceremoniously a little later, showing them to the door with a final thanks for the shortbread and a cryptic word about seeing Helena later. Then they were left to head down the steps and across Maggie's front yard to where they'd tethered the horses, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows behind them. The horses looked content enough — they'd spent their afternoon cropping the long, sweet grass that grew in Maggie's yard. Helena found herself wishing her life was that simple.

"You went a bit quiet in there, Helena," Duncan said thoughtfully, stopping her before she was able to swing aboard her horse. "Is everything okay?"

"It's just overwhelming," she said softly, shaking her head. "I think — I think I might have been counting on the idea that I might be able to get back home someday. Knowing that that's definitely impossible is... well, it sucks."

Duncan sighed. "I understand," he said softly, surprising her.

"You do? You're not annoyed that I've been wanting to leave, even with all your hospitality?"

"Of course," he said blankly. "Helena, we could give you all the hospitality in the world, it still doesn't make this place your home. Not yet, anyway. I'd be an idiot if I expected you to just — give up on your old life just like that." He took a deep breath. "But I'm here to help. We all are. To — to support you."

"Thank you," she said softly, feeling oddly touched. And before she could stop herself or overthink the gesture, she put her arms around him, feeling rather bold to be making such a gesture on the open road. Duncan tensed in surprise for a moment — then she felt his arms tighten around her shoulders, drawing her close, that familiar scent of him that she remembered from that first night making her dizzy... and the heat of his body against hers was doing strange things to her, too, making her heart beat harder and her entire body tingle with a desire she hadn't felt for a very long time...

And then she cleared her throat, drawing back from him with a shy little smile. He patted her shoulder a little awkwardly — was that a blush on his cheeks? She wasn't going to interrogate it, not now, not when she felt this dizzy... and the two of them mounted their horses in a pleasantly charged silence, riding along the edge of the Loch in the late afternoon sunlight. They chatted idly about

pleasantries — small things. The weather. This was an unseasonably warm day for early spring, Duncan told her, and for a moment she considered the prospect of telling him about global warming... but then decided against it. No need to ruin a perfectly pleasant afternoon with talk of the end of the world.

Then again... she supposed there was no real need to worry about it. It wouldn't be much of a problem for a few centuries, and by then she'd have died of old age, right? God, that made her feel strange and lonely... but Duncan's company was helping. Maybe the Sidhe had been onto something, she thought abruptly, gazing across the space between them at the way the sun shone from his hair, the way his gray eyes glinted silver in the sunlight. Maybe the two of them did belong together...

She was lost in thought when they arrived back at the Keep, and it was all she could do to bring herself back to the present when he asked what she was thinking about. "Just — everything," she said, unable to think of a more convincing lie to cover the fact that she'd been thinking very seriously about kissing him. "Why the Sidhe brought me here," she added, with a burst of inspiration. That technically wasn't a lie, now was it?

He smiled as they headed toward the great stone structure of the Keep side by side, but before they climbed the steps, he stopped her. "I have a gift for you," he said, looking a little embarrassed. "A kind of welcome present. I remembered what you said about wishing you could write everything down, and, well..." He dove into his satchel and withdrew what looked like a small leatherbound book. Her eyes widened as she took it and leafed through the pages — they were all blank, and the paper was fine, too.

"A journal," she said, heart beating hard. She could write down everything she'd learned about the Sidhe — start piecing her life together here — "Duncan, this is amazing. Thank you so much." She could feel tears prickling at her eyes at the thoughtfulness of the gift, and she laughed breathlessly as she dashed them away. "Oh, wow. It's been quite a day."

"I'm glad you like it," he told her softly, smiling. "The ladies will help sort you out with some quills and ink."

"Wow," she said softly. "I hadn't thought of that. I'm used to writing in biro." His blank look made her giggle. "Never mind. Might not be invented for a few hundred years. Hey, maybe I could

invent the biro."

"I think you could do just about anything you put your mind to, Helena Gray," Duncan said firmly, taking her pointedly by the shoulders. For a minute, she was just about to reach up and kiss him — but she stopped herself, in the end, regretting her own cowardice fiercely as he smiled at her, then turned and headed off across the courtyard. Something about needing to check his roster for his guard shifts this week — he'd be staying at the castle for a few weeks before returning to his work as a courier across the countryside, and it seemed the guard captain had plenty of work for him in the meantime.

Well, she hoped he had some free time after all his work. Because she had a strong feeling that she wanted Duncan Grant to be part of whatever life she built for herself here. And the Sidhe wanted that too, didn't they? Why else would they have dumped her in the Loch so close to where Duncan just happened to be riding? Why have him be her rescuer, if not to bring the two of them together?

Her heart pounding, Helena headed inside for dinner. For the first time since she'd gotten here, something about the future was filling her with excitement, instead of just dread. And that felt pretty damn good, if she was honest.

Chapter 18

Unfortunately, those good feelings didn't last long. It was three days later that she first heard the whispers of a rumor around the dining hall. Some serious, drawn faces, some worried murmurs that she half-heard on the walk down to breakfast... frowning to herself, she deliberately picked a seat close to a table full of guards, hoping that she'd overhear whatever was going on from them. And sure enough, it wasn't long before they started talking about whatever it was that had happened... and she felt her heart sink.

"There was blood in the water," one of the men kept saying, shaking his head. Helena listened closely as she ate her porridge, trying not to seem too much like she was eavesdropping... but she couldn't help it. She wanted to know what was going on, and as much as she was feeling more comfortable in the Keep these days, she wasn't quite brave enough to just join a table of strange men and ask them what the gossip was.

Slowly, she pieced it together. It seemed that morning, a patrol had come upon the Loch Ness Monster itself, wallowing in the shallows with a deep wound on its shoulder. Just as quickly as it had appeared, it disappeared into the depths... but there was more to the story than just a simple injury to a friendly creature. At first, she'd thought everyone was just worried about the monster's wellbeing, but as the conversation went on, she realized that something else was going on here. Something much more serious.

The Monster patrolled the Loch at night the way that the guards patrolled the castle, covering ground that no human could cover without the aid of a submarine — the depths of the Loch itself, including the Burgh that served as a gateway between the worlds. The fact that the Monster was injured pointed to a serious problem — namely, that something had come through the gate that was strong enough to harm the Monster. There was nothing else in the Loch that was as big as the creature or anywhere near as powerful, so if it had sustained harm, it meant that an Unseelie creature had come through.

Helena couldn't bring herself to finish her porridge, so much

worry was coursing through her. She got to her feet and hurried through the Hall and out into the courtyard. She knew Duncan had been on watch last night, and an irrational part of her was worried that he, too, had gotten hurt somehow, that he'd been grabbed by whatever horrible thing had come out of the Burgh — but to her relief, it wasn't long before she found him. He was coming out of the guard house, still wearing his guard uniform, looking tired and haggard after a long night's watch — but alive, thankfully, and seemingly uninjured. And rather surprised to see her.

"Helena. Tell me I didn't forget about plans we'd made?"

She smiled, shaking her head. The last few days, they'd been sharing at least one meal each day — lunch one day, dinner the next, just spending time with each other, getting to know each other a little more deeply. She'd been telling him about her life — or her old life, at any rate, back in the future, tending to psychologically damaged children, building her practice — and he'd been telling her about his work, about how far he'd traveled and the strange things he'd seen on the road.

"No plans, no," she said, shaking her head. "But over breakfast I heard that something had happened?"

"Aye," he said, shaking his head as he folded his arms across his chest. "Nellie was discovered injured early this morning. It doesn't bode well."

"Because it could mean an Unseelie Fae has come through, a dangerous one, right?" she wanted to know.

Duncan looked impressed. "Aye, you've done your homework."

"I overheard a few things in the dining hall," she admitted, pleased by the compliment.

Duncan sighed. "It means doubled shifts, I'm afraid," he said softly, gesturing behind him. "I've just come from a briefing with Captain Brendan — he's not taking any chances with whatever this creature could be. I'm afraid we'll have to put our explorations on hold for the time being."

Helena sighed. "That's a shame. I was looking forward to seeing the village." The last few days had been rainy and overcast, but Duncan had been promising to take her on a ride to the village as soon as the sun came out again, to show her around the local area that she was now going to be calling home. Karen and her husband lived in the village — they were going to visit with them. Helena had been looking forward to it — she'd realized that she was quite

fond of her new friends, the time-stranded women of Castle Grant.

"I'll work doubly hard to track down this beastie and sort it out for you," Duncan promised, taking her hand firmly in his and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "But until then... there'll be no leaving the castle grounds for anyone, I'm afraid."

"That's okay," Helena said softly. "I'd rather not get eaten by a monster." She hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip. "What could it be, this Unseelie monster? Do you have any idea what it could look like?"

But Duncan only shrugged, his face worried. "I can't say I've had any direct run-ins with the Unseelie myself, though lots of the men have. They can take all sorts of shapes — there's as many different Fae as there are different animals here in our world, if not more."

"So, it could be anything?"

"Some of the men tell stories about Wisps, nasty insect-like creatures with wings and poison fangs. Others tell about a great wolf with eyes like embers that nearly killed a dozen people before the men took it down with cold steel. Others talk about goblin hordes, great swarms of them... that was what Darter was telling us about the other day," he added with a smile.

"A horde of Darter Hobs doesn't sound too bad," Helena said with a soft smile.

But Duncan shook his head firmly. "They're not like Darter, for the most part. Nasty creatures, goblins. Maybe you could spend a little time in the library if you feel like it? There are plenty of books detailing every encounter with these kinds of creatures. Some of it's not true, of course, that's the way it goes with folklore... but it might give you more of an insight than all of my second-hand stories."

She smiled at him. "Good thinking, Duncan. It'll keep me busy, too." She was still itching to find something useful to do with herself. Now that she'd more or less settled in at the Keep, she wanted a way to put her skills to good use — but there weren't many children in the Keep, unless you counted the toddlers who belonged to Anna and Nancy respectively, and those girls were rambunctious as anything and clearly not in need of a child psychologist.

"I'd better go," Duncan said softly, looking regretful. "I'd love to stay and talk more with you, but I'm back on shift at midday and I need to get some sleep before then. Before I go — here. A gift."

She blinked as he reached down to his belt and brought up what looked like a pocket knife. It was about the length of her hand, with a leather sheath covering a sharp, dark metallic blade that glinted in the sun. "A knife?"

"It's cold iron," he told her with a worried-looking smile. "Just in case."

"In case — oh. Right." She made the connection belatedly — the Fae hated cold iron. It was a weakness of theirs. This was in case the worst happened — in case she found herself face to face with an Unseelie Fae. A chill ran down her spine at the practicality of the gift. Was that really a possibility? Was it that likely that she might find herself doing hand to hand combat with... an enormous wolf, or a poisonous insect, or a goblin?

"I don't think you'll need it," Duncan said hastily. "But I'd much rather you have it and not need it than need it and not have it. Think of it as me, keeping you safe."

She couldn't help but smile at that, and she tucked it carefully into her bosom, where Anna had taught her there were plentiful storage options available if you knew how to adjust the fabric correctly. Duncan watched her, smiling. "There," she said with a grin. "Now I'm deadly."

"That you are," Duncan said, his eyes twinkling.

As she usually did when he flirted with her, she felt a blush rise to her cheeks and averted her eyes, though the grin on her face was harder to hide.

"If you see anything strange, alert the nearest Watchman, alright?"

"I will," she promised, taking his hands in hers and giving them a squeeze. "You keep yourself safe too, alright?"

"I will," he promised with a quick smile. "We'll have these beasties sorted out in no time."

She almost believed him, as he hurried off across the courtyard to get in a bit of rest before his second shift. But worry still prickled at her heart as she slowly headed into the Keep, at a bit of a loss for how to spend her time. She'd wanted to go for a walk down on the docks... but now, with the news that some monster might be just about to haul itself out of the water, she had a feeling that that wasn't a smart idea. So instead, she headed up to her room and spent the rest of the morning writing in the journal that Duncan had gotten her. It had taken a little bit of getting used to, writing with

quill and ink, and she'd had a few near misses where she'd nearly spilled the whole ink pot across the pages, but she'd persevered, and now had a reasonable account of the last few days — as well as a couple of sketches of the people she'd met. Maggie, her wrinkled face, and her bright blue eyes... and Darter, too, with his pointed, furry ears and his great dark eyes. She was very fond of the little goblin. She hoped he and Maggie were safe, wherever they were.

And so, the siege began — or something like a siege, at any rate. The worry was clear in the air in the castle, and by dinner time everyone had heard about what had happened — or at least, what they were worried had happened. The Captain of the Guard, a burly man named Brendan, got up to speak to everyone in the dining hall over dinner, filling them in about what was known, and how important it was that everyone stay safe and sound inside the castle — especially at night, when the Unseelie Fae were at their strongest.

She was struck, as she looked around at the faces of the castle folk, by how much unity there was. Nobody was grumbling about being stuck inside, nobody was demanding to know why the guards hadn't caught the monsters yet — there was wordless, unified support for the Captain and for the measures being put in place. It made her feel an odd sense of pride to be one of them — even though she'd barely been there a week. And she was all the more determined to stick it out, to do as she'd been told and stay inside until the monsters had been tracked down and dealt with by the brave men of the Guard.

The sooner they found the creatures, the sooner they could deal with them. The sooner everything could go back to normal. And the sooner she could get some more time alone with Duncan, she thought with a guilty little blush.

Chapter 19

But to Helena's dismay, the days dragged on and on with no sign of the Unseelie creatures being captured. They waited with bated breath each day for Captain Brendan's announcement over dinner — he took to making a quick speech every night, to keep the quarantined castle folk in the loop, but as the days wore on and the speeches became repetitive, enthusiasm began to flag. It seemed that despite the doubled patrols and active searches that were going on of the castle, the Loch and the surrounding areas, nothing had been found. No sign of Unseelie monsters, no sign of damage to property or livestock, no injured or missing people from the village... but that, it seemed, was not a good sign. That meant they were dealing with an intelligent Unseelie Fae, a crafty one that was capable of hiding its presence.

Or did it mean that they weren't dealing with a monster at all? Helena began to wonder as they entered their second week of being stuck in the castle, feeling beleaguered as she sat in the library, gazing out of the window. The weather, of course, was absolutely perfect — cool but sunny, not a spot of rain to be seen, just the kind of weather that you wanted to spend stuck inside in a freezing cold castle. Not that she wasn't grateful to be safe, of course... but God, what she wouldn't give to be exploring the village right now with Duncan, eating little romantic picnic lunches in the grass, talking and laughing as they wiled away the pleasant hours...

Soon, she told herself firmly. Soon, they'd have all the time they needed. Right now, they just had to focus on making sure everyone was safe.

But when would they give up? What if Nellie had killed whatever it was that had done it that damage? Everyone agreed that she was hard to understand — she didn't speak any known human language, and though apparently Maggie could communicate with her, she wasn't great at giving specific answers. There was a chance that the monster was still out there, biding its time... but there was also a chance that it wasn't, that there was no monster at all, and that everyone was wasting their time by waiting

inside.

It seemed that her worries were not just hers. By the two-week mark, with no sign of any kind of untoward behavior from a monster lurking in the forest, the exhausted guards were relieved from their double duty. Helena had never felt more relieved in her life to know that Duncan wouldn't be doing such difficult work. Every time she'd seen him — and it hadn't been very often, given the guards were doubling their patrols — he'd looked more and more haggard and weary, and she was worried that the sleep deprivation and exhaustion were doing worse things to his health than the monster ever could. If there even was a monster... that was the thing that was annoying her most, the knowledge that it simply might not be out there.

Still — she was excited to be able to see more of him, now that the double guard patrols had been dissolved, at least for the time being. There were still extra patrols posted, with a militia from the village having been drafted early in the process but knowing that the castle was going back to normal a little meant Helena breathed a sigh of relief. They were still strongly discouraged from leaving the castle grounds except on urgent business, but there was a lightness to the air that hadn't been there for a long time when Brendan made this final announcement at dinner.

Duncan found her the next day. He looked a lot better than he had the last time she'd seen him — still weary, but the dark circles under his eyes had eased a little, and the smile he gave her wasn't as drawn or worried as it had been the last few times.

"Did you get some sleep?" she asked, amused.

"Aye, that I did," he said with a grin. "And I was hoping that you might be free for dinner this evening."

She pretended to think about it, eyes sparkling with mischief — and the look of actual concern on his face quickly gave way to amusement. "Well, I do have such a packed social calendar — of course I'm free."

"What do you say to dining alone?" he suggested, quirked an eyebrow. "I'd say the dining hall, but I know for a fact that half the guards intend on playing a drinking game to celebrate the end of double duty."

She laughed. "And you won't be playing?"

"I've better things to do than build a hangover," he said with a roll of his eyes. "What do you say? There's a nice little dining room

in the guardhouse that will be entirely unoccupied that time of night."

"It's a date," she said, eyes twinkling. He didn't know what that meant, of course, and she hadn't explained it to him — but it gave her a secret rush of pleasure to flirt with him like that, even if he didn't understand it as flirting. Very safe, low-risk flirting.

That afternoon, she washed her hair. She'd taken for granted the easy modern conveniences when it came to hair-washing — in her new life, washing her hair involved several buckets of warm water, as well as the friendly assistance of the servant woman who'd come to help her that first day. She'd since gotten to know her a little better — her name was Elsie, and she'd been working in the castle for decades, ever since she was a young girl.

"What's the occasion?" Elsie asked idly as she ran a comb through Helena's wet hair, fresh and clean.

Helena froze. "Occasion?"

"More often than not, when a young lass washes her hair, there's a young man involved, that's all," Elsie said with a shrug. "Do forgive me if that's not the case."

"It — might be," Helena said carefully, feeling a blush rise to her cheeks — and Elsie let out a hoot of triumph.

"I knew it! That heartbreaker Duncan Grant if I'm not very much mistaken."

"Elsie! What gives you that idea?"

She chuckled again, her eyes sparkling. "We've all had enough time to observe the pattern, with all you sudden arrivals and those Grant men..."

Ah. The matchmaking Sidhe strike again... Helena could feel her face burning with embarrassment, but at the same time she couldn't bring herself to deny that there was anything going on between her and Duncan. She felt it, a pull to him, magnetic as anything... and though she wasn't exactly an expert on telling when men were into her, she had a suspicion that he felt the same way. Why else would he keep bringing her little presents, insisting on spending as much time with her as he could, always checking in on her and making sure she was doing well? The way he always found excuses to touch her, the way he always lingered a little longer in her personal space than he strictly needed to... it all added up. So, when Elsie pried a little further, Helena just shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose we're seeing each other. We'll see what happens."

Still, her face was rather flushed as she made her way across the courtyard toward the guard house, feeling an odd sense of nervousness deep in her stomach. This was silly. He was Duncan, he was her friend, there was nothing to be worried about... and sure enough, he'd organized them a very pleasant spread. The dining room he'd mentioned seemed to be a meeting room, designed for maybe six men at a time, so they had plenty of space at the table that he'd laid out with cutlery, a tablecloth and a fine dinner spread. She took her assigned seat and smiled as he poured her a glass of wine, his eyes sparkling.

"A toast," she said softly, raising her glass. "To the end of double duty."

"And to a little more time spent together," he agreed, his eyes shining as he clinked his glass against hers.

Her nerves quickly eased as they dropped into conversation — she could never feel uncomfortable around Duncan for too long. There was something about him that just made her feel... not safe, exactly, though she did feel safe. But it was more to do with being — understood. Seen. She wasn't worried about making herself clear, that he might misinterpret her if she spoke too casually... strange, how much she trusted him. He had saved her life that first night, of course, but there was more to it than that. A man as big and intimidating as him could easily be rough and forceful to match — he certainly had the strength for it. But instead, he chose to be polite, to be kind and easygoing, to ease off instead of bearing down when he was challenged — she'd noticed it in the easy, friendly interactions she'd witnessed him having with the other men of the Watch. No ego; that was the thing. It made him very attractive. So did the rest of the package, of course, she thought, her eyes tracing down from his face to his broad shoulders, to the patch of bare skin she could see where his shirt was unbuttoned...

"What are you thinking, Helena?"

She jumped, feeling like she'd been caught, but he was just smiling at her, a thoughtful look on his face.

"You looked a thousand miles away."

What could she do? Tell him she'd been thinking about how much she liked him? "Just — how strangely comfortable I feel here," she said with a soft smile, lowering her eyes. "It's only been — what, three weeks? And yet... I don't know. It's still not quite home, but it's definitely getting there. And that's a record for me."

"I'm glad," Duncan said softly, gazing at her across the table. He looked absolutely gorgeous by torchlight, the flames from the torches in brackets on the wall flickering from his face as the last of the sunset light drained from the sky outside. "I want you to be happy here, Helena. I know it's awful to lose your whole life, your home, your family... but I want you to be able to build something new here."

"I think I can," she said softly. "Eventually. It'll take time, but... I feel very supported. A lot of that's down to the other ladies," she said with a grin, thinking of how fiercely supportive the women had been since she'd arrived. It had been good, using the last few weeks to get to know a couple of them better. Julia reminded her a great deal of her sister — and not just because they had the same name, and the same dark red hair... "But a lot of it's down to you, Duncan. I wanted to say thank you."

He smiled, looking surprised and oddly touched to hear that. "You're more than welcome, Helena. I might just as easily thank you, for the pleasure of your company."

Now she was blushing in earnest. And maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was just his company, the boldness that had been built out of the easy camaraderie between them, but she found herself speaking before she could second-guess the impulse. "Do you — do you know what they say about the Sidhe? About the women they bring here?"

He tilted his head, looking curious. She was acutely aware of how close he was sitting to her — they'd taken chairs on the same side of the table, the better to hear each other over the crackling of the little fire in the hearth behind them. "Can't say I do. What do they say?"

"That part of what motivates them..." She was blushing in earnest now, her face burning. "That aside from saving our lives, they're interested in... in finding us a match. Or finding — finding the men here a match. Or both, I suppose. That's why all eight of the other women fell for Grant men just about as soon as they got here."

He looked at her intently for a long moment, so long she thought she might pass out from holding her breath hard. This was about as bold as she'd ever been with a man, and she was terrified that she'd gotten something wrong, that he was about to stammer an apology, tell her that she'd misinterpreted, that he didn't feel

that way about her. That would crush her utterly, she knew that. She'd just go back to her room and lie in bed and wait for the blankets to swallow her whole and leave no trace...

"Is that so?" he said softly, tilting his head again. Was he closer than he had been? "Do you think you might fall into that pattern?"

"Maybe," she said, feeling her heart pounding so hard in her throat she was worried Duncan would hear it.

A smile broke out across his face and his eyes danced with a mischief that made her light-headed. "And which Grant man do you have your eye on? He'd be a kinsman; I can arrange an introduction —"

Her eyes widened... and with a sound that was somewhere between a sigh of exasperation and a laugh, she reached out and grabbed him by the back of the head, drawing him into an enthusiastic, passionate kiss that quickly claimed both of them completely.

Chapter 20

The next few days passed in a happy daze. Helena could barely concentrate on anything. She'd taken on a few duties around the Keep, more to stay busy during the interminable period of being stuck indoors than anything, but she kept forgetting where she was up to or where she was meant to go next, so utterly distracted was she by the memory of the kiss she'd shared with Duncan that night. It felt like it had lasted forever — but it could really only have been a few minutes before they'd been unfortunately drawn apart by the sounds of a crowd of guards entering the guardhouse, talking loudly amongst themselves. Duncan had walked her back to the Keep and kissed her goodnight, and she'd all but floated up to her room on a cloud of utter delight... and the dreams she'd had that night, well, they made her blush just to think about.

The other women noticed her good mood — how could they not? But she was amused to note that none of them asked her about it — not even Nancy, who looked like she was about to burst every time they passed each other but kept their conversation firmly away from the handsome guardsman that Helena was so often seen with. Elena must have had words with everyone, she thought with amusement, telling them not to bother her too much about the relationship. Didn't want her to feel pressured into it.

Well, she felt anything but pressured. If anything, she could have used a little more pressure. She wanted Duncan so badly it made her dizzy — but he was, of course, a perfect gentleman. Though the thought of taking their relationship further rarely left her mind especially when she was alone in her little room... he seemed determined to take things slowly, and though the kisses they stole here and there around the castle were passionate, there was no pressure to move any further.

That was probably a good thing, of course. It had occurred to her rather quickly that she couldn't exactly duck down to the drug store for a box of condoms — if they were going to make love, she'd have to sort out contraception first. She had a suspicion that talking to Maggie would be a good idea — the old woman's cottage was so

full of herbs and potions that one of them must have something to do with preventing a pregnancy. What else was the village witch for, after all, other than protecting young women from the scandal of a pregnancy out of wedlock? Not that Maggie was a witch, not explicitly... but she seemed to fill that role, from what Helena had heard about the relationship of the villagers to Maggie, which was somewhere between fear and awe. Just like Maggie liked it, she suspected, thinking with a grin of the brusque little old woman.

Since the strictness of the 'nobody leaves the castle ground' rule seemed to be easing up, she saw more and more people leaving through the gates on horseback as the days wore on with no more indications that there was anything untoward going on out there. No reports of injuries or missing people, no sign of anything strange or mysterious seen in the woods... and from what she'd heard, even the villagers had largely given up on their militia patrols, reasoning that whatever had come through the Burgh and hurt Nellie, it was long gone now. Perhaps she had eaten it after it had hurt her, in vengeance.

Helena decided that she was going to ask Duncan to escort her to Maggie's cottage for another visit. It would be nice to get some alone time with him on the road — and besides, she wanted to ask Maggie about contraception, as well as to check in about how Nellie was recovering from her injuries. Though she still hadn't seen the creature, the way the other castle folk spoke about her — with a mixture of fear and fondness — made her feel oddly close to the creature, and she wanted to know she was okay. She was ready with her pitch when Duncan met her in the dining hall for breakfast — but the worried look on his face quickly banished what she'd been thinking about when he came in.

"What's going on, Duncan?"

"Word from Maggie," he said softly, lifting a scrap of parchment that certainly looked like it had come from Maggie's cottage — it was stained with all manner of mysterious liquids, and the handwriting on it was utterly illegible to Helena, who frowned anyway and made a gallant attempt to read it. "Something's wrong."

"Is it Nellie?" Helena felt a chill run down her spine. What if the poor creature had gotten worse? Worse still — what if it had passed away? That would certainly be a terrible omen... and what would patrol the Loch for them, warning them of enemies? But Duncan was shaking his head.

"Not the monster, no, though I'm worried about her, too. No, Maggie says Darter won't speak. Says he's been silent for three days now, as though his tongue's been cut out — though when she grabbed him and pinned him down, his tongue was right there in his mouth where it was supposed to be."

Helena imagined the struggle that had gone on there and resisted the urge to laugh, despite her worry. "Completely silent?" she wanted to know, frowning. "Why?"

"No idea," Duncan said, shaking his head. "But for Maggie to send for help from the Castle, she'd be very seriously worried. I think that woman could lose a leg and still refuse to ask for assistance. But she cares very much for Darter." He waved the paper at her meaningfully. "And she's asked for you, too. By name."

"Why —" Helena took a deep breath, calming her racing thoughts. "Of course. I mentioned my work last time. She knows I work with children, traumatized..." She frowned. "You don't think something's happened to Darter? Some kind of trauma that's stopped him from speaking?" It was the most likely explanation for a child going abruptly silent — but for some reason it hadn't occurred to her to think of Darter like a child. She'd assumed that a magical explanation was at fault — a curse, maybe, or a spell. Could it be something as pedestrian as a traumatic event? If that was the case... well, she'd need to get there quickly, before Maggie did anything like pinning the boy down and looking into his mouth again.

Duncan seemed to be thinking along the same lines, which she was grateful for. The two of them ate their breakfast quickly, while Duncan filled her in on every detail he knew about the little goblin's life, his species, the particular quirks of his particular sub-species of goblin, an aquatic race called *glashtyns*.

"I don't know if that helps," he kept saying, obviously worried, and Helena kept reassuring him that nothing was irrelevant when it came to building up a full picture of a client. "I know he used to be part of a big gang of Unseelie goblins, but I don't know much about his time in the group. He was very young — and not part of the gang long. As you can imagine, they were very willing to use him and toss him aside — which is basically what they did, with his injured arm. And he mentioned Nancy saved him from them bullying him."

Helena sighed. "That kind of trauma could absolutely cause the

kind of shutdown that Maggie's talking about. But I don't know why it would be happening now, years after the initial trauma... unless something came up to trigger it." She sighed, getting to her feet, and leaving half of her breakfast on her plate. She'd eaten enough — her worry about Darter wasn't letting her eat any more. "We'd better get going."

They got horses in record time and Duncan surprised her by urging his into a sharp canter the minute they were across the narrow land bridge that joined the island the Keep stood on to the mainland. Gritting her teeth and doing her best to remember her lessons, which suddenly seemed like a very long time ago, Helena leaned forward and urged her own horse into a steady, loping canter which ate up the ground. It wasn't long before Maggie's cottage came into view. To her surprise, Maggie was waiting in the front yard for them, and she waved irritably as they pulled their horses to a stop and slid down.

"About time. Come on, come on, come on."

And with that, she hastened inside. Duncan and Helena exchanged worried glances. Gone was the confident, irascible old woman they'd met a few weeks prior — this Maggie was a changed person. The worry on her face was clear, her blue eyes clouded and even her posture indicating how deeply afraid she was for the safety of her little charge.

"I've never seen her like this," Duncan said softly, looking even more worried than Maggie. "Poor Darter really must be in a bad way."

"I'll do what I can," Helena said softly, squeezing his hand in hers. "I've dealt with traumatized children before. I've got a decent success rate, too, in breaking through those walls, helping them start to heal..."

"Those were all human patients, though," Duncan said worriedly, biting his lip. "I don't doubt you're wonderful, Helena, really, but — what if your methods don't work as well on the Fae? They've got such different minds to us — I mean, you've met Maggie, you know how strange they can be... what if your methods only work on humans?"

"I don't know," Helena said firmly, taking him by the shoulders and giving him an affectionate little shake. "I don't know if it'll work, I don't know anything about goblins. All I can do is hope that what works on a frightened human child is close enough to what

works on a frightened goblin child. And if not..." She took a deep breath. "If not, we figure something else out. Okay?"

"Alright," he said softly, flashing that smile at her and making her heart melt a little. "I trust you, Helena. Let's go." He took a step and then stopped, holding her back a moment. "Do you have that dagger on you? Best we leave it out here, Maggie doesn't like iron in her cottage."

"Oh, yes, I suppose she doesn't." Helena pulled the dagger from her bodice and handed it to him.

Duncan returned to the horse and slipped it into the saddlebag. "There we are." He took her arm and they continued to the door.

Stepping into the cottage felt like stepping into a sick bay. Somehow, the space was even more crowded than it had been that first day — Helena looked around, wondering if Maggie had gotten even more furniture, somehow, before realizing what it was. The entire low table that sat in front of the couch was covered in oils, balms, and tinctures, haphazardly stacked, some of them knocked over. Leaves and poultices, vials of ointment half-emptied, strange powders spread across the table... it was a mess. Maggie was bustling back and forth in front of the couch, wringing her hands. The fire was stoked to a blazing heat, and Helena saw Duncan turn away to take his cloak off from around his shoulders, clearing his throat softly.

"Maggie? Where's Darter?"

She gestured wordlessly — and Helena realized that the lump of blankets on the couch wasn't a lump of blankets after all. It was Darter — all but swaddled in the blankets, his dark eyes and pointed ears just about the only thing she could make out amongst the layers upon layers of fabric.

"He just keeps shivering," Maggie said, distractedly. "I've kept him warm as toast, but it won't do anything. I've given him just about everything you can give for a fever, for a cold, for anything... none of it's done a thing."

"It's okay," Helena said softly, using the voice she always used with worried parents. "It's all going to be okay. This is good, what you've done," she added, smiling as she gestured to the blankets. "I'm sure Darter feels very safe and very loved. Isn't that right, Darter?"

The little goblin gave no sign he'd heard her. His eyes were fixed on the middle distance — but when she moved a little closer, she

saw him shift under the blankets. Looking closely, she could see that he was reaching over his little body with his good arm to gently rub the withered one. Interesting.

"He keeps doing that," Maggie said, shaking her head. "Keeps rubbing his arm. I gave him an ointment for it, and something for pain, and something to help him sleep, and none of it did anything —"

"That's okay," Helena said, more firmly this time. "Maggie — can I ask a favor?"

Worried as Maggie might have been, her eyes lit up with amusement. "You ought to be careful about asking favors of the Fae, lassie."

"Thought you were only half Fae," she said, risking the joke. It won a laugh, though it was a weak one.

"I'll give you a favor for free, how about that," Maggie said carefully.

"Would you go upstairs with Duncan, and leave the two of us to talk?"

Duncan and Maggie exchanged glances — but they both nodded. It wasn't long before Helena was alone with Darter Hob, and she took a seat in the armchair beside him, making sure her body language was nonthreatening, her body angled away though her face was pointed toward him. Then she took a deep breath.

Time to see if contemporary human psychology would work on a medieval goblin.

Chapter 21

"Darter, we don't have to talk if you don't want to, okay?" she started, keeping her voice deliberately soothing and calm. "I asked the other two to go upstairs for a while because I had a feeling you might like some quiet. Is that right?"

His eyes were still fixed on the middle distance and he gave no visible indication that he was listening to her or that he'd even heard a word she'd said — but Helena had always had an instinct for when a child was actually listening intently to her. That instinct was telling her now that Darter Hob was clinging to her every word. Whether she could trust it was another question entirely — the little goblin's body language was very different to the language she was used to reading from children — but she had nothing else to go on, did she?

"I'm here," she said softly. "I'm going to just sit here with you for a long while. And if you want to talk about anything, I'm right here — but you don't have to. All you need to do right now is be here with me."

And with that said, she settled back into the armchair, making a show of reading the book in her lap so that Darter didn't feel like she was waiting on him to say anything. In truth, she was barely looking at the book — it was her own journal, and she wasn't especially interested in reading and re-reading her own complaints about not seeing Duncan and not being able to leave the castle — but it was a useful prop. It must have been ten, maybe fifteen minutes later that she heard the first promising sound from Darter — he shifted his weight slightly, and she could see in her peripheral vision that he was pulling some of the blankets off himself, coming out of his little cocoon. That was a good sign.

And it was an even better sign when he started speaking.

At first, his voice was so whisper-quiet that she couldn't make out what he was saying, but she didn't dare to break the spell by asking him to speak up. And eventually, she was rewarded for her patience by his voice increasing in volume until she could just make out every other word — something about goblins, and danger. And

then, finally, his dark little eyes turned to her and she saw him take a deep, shuddering breath then sit up straight.

"I saw them," he said quickly, as though trying to get the poison out as quickly as possible. "I saw them, the ones that everyone was looking for, I was out, and it was dark, but I saw them because I can see in the dark and they were goblins and they're out there. They're still out there in the forest, waiting. They know — they know — " He shuddered.

Helena moved quickly to his side, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder through the thick blanket. "It's okay, Darter. You're safe now. You're here with me, okay? With your friends, safe and sound in this cottage." She risked a guess. "Maggie wouldn't let anyone in here, would she? Not without her say-so."

That won an exhausted little laugh from him, and a rapid nod of his head. Quietly rejoicing, she waited, quiet, hoping like hell he'd explain a little more of what he was talking about — but she wasn't going to push him. Not right now, not in this fragile state.

"Goblins hate it when members of their clan change side," he whispered finally, and his dark eyes were so full of an incredibly human fear that Helena felt a lump rise to her throat. "Especially the Unseelie. I changed sides... if they find me, they're going to kill me. I keep —" She saw him reach across his body again, rubbing his arm, remembered what Maggie had said about that having become a bit of a compulsion lately. "I keep thinking about my arm, and then it's like... it's like I'm holding the iron again, it feels like — " He whimpered, his body going tense as he clutched at his arm, and she could see his eyes unfocusing again as whatever flashback he was experiencing took hold of him again.

"Darter," she said quickly, her eyes flicking around the room. "How many jars are on the table? Darter. It's important you tell me right now."

He stared at her, clearly not understanding — but the bossy tone she'd taken had startled him into taking action, and she heard him start to count the jars out loud.

"Six — sixteen?"

"And how many of them have powder and how many have liquid?"

He counted again; brow furrowed. "Six powder, ten liquid —"

"What colors?"

He recited a long list, then narrowed his eyes at her. "Why are

you asking me —"

"Does it still feel like you're holding the iron?"

"Holding the —" His eyes widened in shock. "No! That's some trick." He tilted his head, huge eyes full of wonder. "You know magic."

She couldn't help but laugh a little at that, hoped he wouldn't find it condescending. "Oh, I wish. No, it's just a little psychology trick. Sometimes, the mind gets trapped in places that are painful for it to be. It gets confused when we're stressed — it gets mixed up and thinks that the memory is happening right now, and it stirs the whole body up into a panic, trying to fix it."

"That's what it feels like," Darter whispered, nodding his head.

"Yeah, I'm not surprised. You went through a big, scary thing, Darter. You were so brave — but that memory is a heavy thing to carry around with you." She took a breath. "And I bet you didn't tell your friends about what you saw, about what was worrying you."

His eyes dropped to his lap and he started twisting at the blanket, clearly worried. "I didn't ... I didn't want them to think I was... I wanted them to know I'm strong. Even though I don't have an arm, I'm strong."

"You're so strong, Darter," she said softly, meaning it. "There's a special test I like to give to people, in my job — I only give it to people who are as strong as you. Would you like to know what it is?"

He looked at her for a long moment... then curiosity won out over caution, and he nodded. She smiled.

"The test is to tell the people you love when you're having a hard time, so they can help you. For strong people, it's the hardest test of all. But if your friends were struggling like this, you'd want them to ask you for help, wouldn't you?"

"Of course. And I'd help."

"That's how your friends feel about you, okay?"

He nodded, though he still looked reluctant to accept it. That was fairly normal — people usually had a different set of rules for themselves than they did for everyone else, especially when it came to enduring suffering.

"They want to help you. You have to let them." She grinned. "I mean, look how many vials Maggie went through, trying to make your arm feel better."

He laughed, a breathy, gasping little sound. "Sixteen jars."

"Right," she said with a smile. "And hey — if you start to feel your mind doing that again, digging up those old memories and then freaking out as though they're happening right now... all you have to do is what I told you to do. Right? Just distract it with whatever comes to hand. Count all the vials you can see, maybe. The one I like to do is to name everything I can see, along with its color. Like this — brown bookshelf. Clear glass jar... purple powder... green leaf, brown leaf... do you think you can remember that?"

Darter nodded. Then he yawned, his jaw hinging wide to show an array of shark-like and devastatingly sharp teeth. A little shocked — and amused, despite herself, by this reminder of his fundamental non-humanness.

Helena gave him a fond smile. "Tired, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't know why, all I've been doing is sitting here," he said, sounding a little troubled.

"You haven't just been sitting here. Your mind thinks you've been going through the worst day of your life over and over — and it's told your body to be ready to deal with that, too. It's only natural that you'd be tired."

"I'm going to go to bed," he said, sliding off the couch with the blanket still wrapped around him. "Will you — will you tell Maggie, and Duncan and everyone, about the goblins?"

"I'll handle it," she promised, giving him her biggest smile. "Thank you so much, Darter."

"What for?"

"For trusting me to help you. Great job on the test!"

He grinned back at her, though it was a distracted grin — and then he shuffled off to wherever it was he slept. Once he was gone, Helena slumped back into the chair, feeling oddly drained — the same way she always did after a particularly difficult session with a client. But she felt exhilarated, too. And fulfilled. This was what she did well — and she'd done it. She'd brought the little goblin right out of his catatonic state and back into the world.

Now, of course, she had to deal with what he'd told her.

"Where is he?" Maggie, thundering down the stairs like a herd of bulls with her blue eyes wide with fear.

Helena rose to her feet to stop the woman charging for the front door, repeating her name over and over until she swung back around. "He's gone to bed, Maggie. He was exhausted."

"What? He's been — he's just been lying there for three — you got him to get up?" Maggie looked shocked — but one quick look at the couch confirmed her suspicions, and she covered her mouth in shock, staring at Helena as though she was some kind of witch. "How?"

"First of all — he's okay," she said firmly. "Physically, at least, he's not hurt — nothing's going on with his arm that wasn't already going on with it, so you don't need to keep blowing through all your herbs." She gestured to the table full of potions, but Maggie waved a hand dismissively.

"There's always more herbs. What's wrong with him? Why was he so —"

Helena took a deep breath. "He told me a little bit. He said that he saw the creatures that came out of the Loch a few weeks ago. He said that they were goblins."

Maggie's eyes widened and she sat down hard on the couch, her mind clearly racing behind her sharp blue eyes. As Helena was about to go on, she heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up as Duncan came down to join them, a worried look on his face — she beckoned for him to come over and he took a seat next to Maggie, putting a comforting hand on the place her shoulder would have been if it wasn't absolutely buried in rags.

"If there are goblins back in the country, no wonder Darter was so frightened," Maggie said in a low voice, shaking her head. And then — as it so often did — the relief on her face that Darter was okay was replaced immediately by anger. "Why the blazes didn't he tell me? He didn't say a word! Just got quieter and quieter then stopped talking entirely — I thought he'd been cursed, I ran through every counter-hex in my book, I was calling on dark forces —"

Helena cleared her throat. "I don't know Darter very well," she said carefully. "But I have worked with a lot of little boys who've been through difficult times. It makes you grow up, in a very specific way, very quickly — and it isn't very good for you. What often happens is that they want to seem strong, especially to the people in their life who they admire. Their family members, often their fathers, or their mothers... and they think that if people know they're afraid, they'll also think they're weak, that they're letting them down."

Maggie scowled. "Daft thing to think. It'd be stupid *not* to be frightened of a horde of goblins, especially with his history."

Alright. So, they weren't going to address the subject of Darter seeing Maggie as a kind of parental figure... she smiled to herself, shaking her head as Maggie got up and clattered into the kitchen to get them something to drink. She had the old woman's number now. She might put on a good show of being grumpy and irascible, but Helena had seen how relieved she'd been when Helena had told her Darter was okay.

She just hoped she could make sure he stayed okay.

Chapter 22

They stayed a while longer after that, into the afternoon. She had a suspicion that Maggie needed them to stay that long, needed to calm her own nerves down, though she was acting twice as brusque and blustery as she usually did, as though to save face. Occasionally, Duncan and Helena would exchange amused glances — all the old woman's bluster was powerless against them now. They'd seen how much she cared about Darter, how worried she'd been. They knew she was all bark and no bite, now — at least, no bite when it came to the people she cared about. And she cared about a lot more people than she let on, it seemed.

But Maggie had another surprise lined up for them, it seemed. When the afternoon sun was beginning to shift into the reddish tones of early evening, Duncan started to get to his feet — and Maggie cleared her throat. She'd been quiet for a little while, and Helena had suspected she was working up the courage to say something. She'd been expecting a brusque thanks, maybe a threat that if they told anyone she'd been vulnerable for five minutes then she'd feed them to the Loch Ness Monster — but what Maggie actually said blew her away for a moment.

"Helena. Would you stay?"

She blinked, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

"Here," Maggie said, voice snapping with impatience. "For a little while. To make sure Darter's — " She took a deep breath. "I know the properties of every herb that grows this side of the Burgh and a good few that grow on the other. But there was nothing any of my power could do for Darter until you came along. I'd like you to keep an eye on him." Her eyes flicked up to Duncan and a characteristic scowl colored her expression. "That is, if you'll be permitted —"

"Of course," Duncan said easily, looking down at Helena. "The choice is all Helena's. I'll visit," he added with a smile. "I can bring your things from the Keep later, in fact. I've quite a few messages to deliver this week."

Helena felt her heart sink at the prospect that she wouldn't be seeing quite as much of Duncan as she had been... but despite that,

she felt a warm glow suffusing her chest at the knowledge that Maggie had actually voiced a request for her to stay. Something about the look on the woman's face — and the general atmosphere in the cottage — told Helena that this wasn't an invitation that was extended particularly often. "I'd be delighted," she said softly, giving Maggie her warmest smile.

The woman nodded briskly, as though they'd just been discussing something as minor as who was going to put the kettle on for tea and turned wordlessly to bustle off into the kitchen.

"You sure you'll be alright here?" Duncan asked once she was out of earshot, moving in to take Helena's hands in his.

The warmth of the contact made her heart flutter, but she nodded firmly, ignoring the attraction for a moment. "It'll be good to keep a close eye on Darter. He was very shaken up, and PTSD's not an easy thing to handle on your own. You'll be alright to take my horse back to the Keep?"

He nodded, smiling at her — then swooped in quickly for a stolen kiss that, quick as it was, left her head spinning. Then he called a pleasant farewell to Maggie with those mischievous gray eyes still locked on Helena — and with that, he was gone.

It felt a little strange being in Maggie's house as the evening closed in. The woman showed her up the stairs, where a hallway stretched away, making Helena frown — it seemed longer than the cottage could possibly have been, based on how it looked from the outside, and there were a surprising number of wooden doors. Maggie pushed one open to reveal a cozy, pleasant little guest room with an ample bed and even a little fireplace with a chimney leading up toward the roof... just how many chimneys did the house have, from the outside? Not important, Helena supposed, feeling a strange lurch as she remembered that there were supernatural forces afoot here.

When night fell, Darter came out to join them for dinner. He still looked a little shaken, his eyes enormous and his hands trembling slightly, but a breath seemed to go out of Maggie when she saw him that she'd been holding for quite some time. "You're looking better," was all she said.

But Helena didn't miss the way she heaped extra chunks of meat and vegetable into the bowl she was ladling out for Darter, the watchful way she made sure he finished every bite. Helena hoped the little goblin boy remembered what she'd told him about trusting

his friends to support him. There was a lot of love in this room.

They stayed up a little while, and Helena was surprised by what a pleasant evening they had. Maggie extracted a bottle of mead from some forgotten corner of the cottage, and the liquid was strong and spicy and absolutely delicious, seeming to warm Helena from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head with every sip. Darter had some, too — for a moment, Helena wondered if that was appropriate, given his age, then gave up on the topic. In the medieval era, children had routinely consumed beer and wine — she remembered reading that somewhere. Besides, she had no idea how old Darter actually was. Maybe he was twenty-one in the Fae world. The mead seemed to strengthen him a little, too — as did the games of cards they played, long into the night — though he looked up very sharply whenever the wind rattled the blinds.

The next morning dawned bright and early, with the sun peeking through the blinds of her room and drawing her pleasantly from her sleep. She dressed quickly and headed downstairs to find Maggie bustling about in the kitchen and Darter stoking the fire with his good arm, his bad one tucked against his side. But they weren't the only people there — Helena took a sharp breath of surprise when she saw a young girl sitting at the kitchen table. She must have been fifteen or sixteen, only a slip of a thing, with a mane of fiery red hair and a pair of enormous blue eyes that were fixed on Helena. She was very cute — but there was also something very sharp in her expression that was belied by her youth and the bright, girlish voice she spoke with.

"You must be one of the visitors!"

"Hi," Helena said unsurely, glancing over at Maggie, who had a knife in hand and was chopping up a bundle of herbs. "Who are —"

"Kaitlyn, this is Helena. Kaitlyn is my apprentice," Maggie filled her in. "She lives in the village, but that doesn't stop her coming here every week to plague me."

"She loves me really," Kaitlyn said smugly, her blue eyes shining.

Helena couldn't help but smile too as she joined her at the table — there was a great platter of buttered toast that Maggie grunted and gestured at in a way that told her it was a communal breakfast. Darter came and joined them, too — Helena was pleased to see him eating something.

"When did you... arrive, Helena?"

She hesitated for a moment. Duncan had told her to be careful

who she told about who she was and where she was from. Maggie and Darter were obviously fine — they knew more than she did about where she was from and how she'd gotten there. But during their talks, Duncan had made it clear that the village folk weren't quite as — well, open-minded about women being delivered from the future to the past. They were just as likely to think of it as witchcraft as anything else... and a lot of the women had had close calls with some of the supernatural shenanigans brought about by the Burgh being blamed on them.

"A few weeks ago," she said cautiously. "I'm staying at the Keep."

"Right, brilliant." Kaitlyn's blue eyes were gleaming with amusement. "And are you from the twenty-first century, or the twenty-second?"

Helena all but choked on her toast, hearing Maggie cackle with amusement from the kitchen as she worked to clear her throat again. "Kaitlyn's far too nosy to keep secrets from, Helena," she chimed in, her amusement clear in her voice. "You can speak freely. She knows if she lets on to anyone, I'll feed her to the Monster."

"Nellie would never eat me, we're friends," Kaitlyn said archly. "What did you do in the future? Were you a detective or an investigator like Melanie and Elena and —"

"Nothing quite so exciting," Helena said, shaking her head with a smile. It felt good to be able to talk freely to someone else about where she was from. Even the folk of the Castle weren't necessarily familiar with the exact details of her origin story. "I worked as a psychologist."

Kaitlyn frowned a little — like many of the people she'd spoken to, it seemed she didn't know that word.

"A kind of doctor of the mind."

"Oh," Kaitlyn said, blinking. "You treat madness?"

"Something like that," Helena said with a smile, impressed with how quickly the girl had made the connection. "But I also help people to have healthier minds in general. The same way a doctor might advise you to get lots of fresh air and exercise and good food to keep your body strong, I help people keep their minds strong."

"To avoid madness," Kaitlyn said sagely. "That's so interesting. There are all kinds of interesting jobs in the future. Maybe the Sidhe will let me go there when I'm older," she said brightly, her eyes flicking toward Maggie, who clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"Make your life here, lass, I keep warning you. You'll never find

happiness if you keep wanting to be elsewhere."

Helena nodded at that surprising little piece of wisdom, smiling to herself. Maggie was right... and she had a suspicion that the words were intended for her as well as Kaitlyn, though Maggie didn't let on as she bustled about in the kitchen with her back to them. Looking around the odd little scene — the teenage girl quizzing her about her career back in the future, the pointy-eared goblin working his quiet way through an enormous platter of buttered toast, and the tiny old witch bustling about in the kitchen, Helena was surprised to realize how at home she felt right now.

She only wished Duncan was there to share in some of the fun. That was another surprise — how strong her feelings were for him already, how quickly she'd fallen for him. Their romantic relationship had really only started a few days ago, but it already felt so... so easy, almost. Not in a low-effort way, but... something else. They just seemed to fit together, to click into place like puzzle pieces who belonged together. She couldn't figure out what it was, why she liked him so much, why they got on so well. Her whole life she'd been mercilessly analytical when it came to dating, forcing herself to keep her feelings back while she looked at things as objectively as possible. Maybe that was why no relationship had lasted more than a few months. But this one... this one, to her surprise, she could see lasting. She could see herself with Duncan for a very long time. Building a life with him, spending time with him... God, maybe even raising a little family of their own one day.

It was silly, to get so far ahead of herself, she told herself firmly. Right now, her focus needed to be right here and now — on helping Darter get through his trauma, all while hoping that the Unseelie Fae out there were tracked down and sorted out by the Watch sooner rather than later.

But after all that... she had a feeling that she and Duncan were going to sit down and have a good long talk about what there was between them.

Helena couldn't wait.

Chapter 23

The days flew by at Maggie's cottage. She quickly settled into the pleasant routine of the place — Kaitlyn coming by most mornings for lessons, the afternoons spent pottering about doing various jobs and errands in the gardens, and evening settled in around the fireplace, stew for dinner and then cards until everyone was yawning. Helena was keeping a close eye on Darter, too, making sure the little goblin was doing okay, healing well. She didn't want to push him into formal psychology sessions, but she did make a point of talking to him on his own more than a few times, often while they were working in the garden. Maggie, it turned out, had a prodigious vegetable garden out the back that stretched right off into the forest — there was even a herd of cattle down the back, which explained why Maggie always had abundant butter and cheese to share with her guests.

Darter was making good progress. She taught him a few more grounding tips, ways to work through the traumatic experience he'd had, tactics and tricks to try when he could feel himself spiraling into a flashback or any similar unpleasant experience. He was opening up more and more about what had happened to him, telling her the story piece by piece, careful to stop and interrogate the negative thought patterns that could send him spiraling. She was moved, every time they talked, by his bravery and his tenacity, his determination to get better, not to fall into that dark place again.

But all of that came crashing to a halt on her third night at the cottage. She'd fallen asleep to the sound of the gentle drumming of rain on the roof, peaceful and content... but when she'd woken, it was still dark, and she couldn't figure out at first what had stirred her from her sleep. Then the sounds came again. Low, croaking sounds... frogs? she wondered. Still bleary from sleep as she sat up in bed, she rubbed her eyes and listened more closely. The cattle were restless, too — she could hear them lowing. What was going on?

The sounds came again, and this time her heart leapt into her

throat. They were close to the house — in the vegetable garden out back, she'd be willing to bet — and they weren't frogs, she realized with a jolt. They were voices — low, rasping voices, saying things she couldn't quite make out. But she picked up a word here and there, enough to tell her that she wasn't imagining it. There were people out there, talking to each other... but there was something so unsettling about their voices. They didn't sound human.

That was when she got to her feet and started dressing herself. Hoping against hope that it was nothing, that she was over-reacting, she headed downstairs — only to find Maggie, Darter and Kaitlyn who had decided to stay the night to make an early start on some herbcraft lessons from Maggie standing in the living room, deep in conversation, their worried faces illuminated only by candlelight.

"Did you hear —"

"Shh," Maggie said sharply. She took a deep breath, joining the worried-looking little group... then her face fell as she looked at Darter. Gone was the tremulous strength he'd built back up over the last few days, the look of hopeful confidence on his face. He was back to the shaking, unresponsive wreck he'd been that first day when Maggie had called them down — and the worry on her face and Kaitlyn's told her all she needed to know.

"Darter," she said softly — but he didn't look up at her, barely responded to her voice. "Darter — it's okay. You're safe. Try and do the exercises?"

She saw his lips move a little, as though trying to respond, and she felt her heart ache in sympathy for him. But a sound quickly distracted them — the sound of voices again, further away this time, and then the panicked lowing of cattle. Maggie's eyes widened, a look of uncharacteristic fury suddenly burning across her face. "They're interfering with my herds."

And with that, she was off, striding toward the front door with more speed than Helena had thought she was capable of. She froze for a minute, torn between her worry about Darter and her need to find out what was going on outside — she started after Maggie then turned back, biting her lip as she looked at Kaitlyn. "Can you look after Darter?"

The girl nodded, face worried, clearly frightened of what was going on outside — but she gathered Darter in her arms in a businesslike way that made Helena suspect she must have younger siblings. The two of them retreated to the couch, and as Helena

made after Maggie, she could hear the girl talking to Darter in a low, soothing voice, bringing up some of the exercises Helena had been teaching him. She smiled to herself, impressed again by the girl's sharpness. She must have been listening more closely than Helena had thought when she'd been working with Darter on his panic.

Outside, it was blustery and cold. To her relief, the rain had stopped for now, but it had been replaced by a savage wind that whipped around the cottage and tugged at her skirts. Maggie was already halfway down the garden like a vengeful spirit, her short form almost disappearing in the gloom as Helena hastened after her. She stopped dead at the end of the vegetable garden and they both peered into the paddock where her cattle were usually grazing peacefully. Sure enough, something was wrong — Helena could just make out in the darkness that the cattle were charging back and forth, clearly frightened.

And then something strange happened. Maggie didn't move or change in any way — but it was like the barometric pressure suddenly dropped, and for a moment Helena felt dizzy, as though she'd been standing on a ship that had suddenly lurched. Her eyes were on the cattle — and as she watched, they all stopped as one, turning their heads briefly toward where Maggie and Helena stood — before gathering close together and beginning to run.

She'd never seen anything like it. She'd seen the herd run together, of course — they often came shambling over quite quickly when Maggie came out with hay for them to eat. But this was more unified than that — almost as though they were all being controlled by a single mind. Maggie's eyes didn't leave the herd, and Helena could almost see her lips moving as she watched them intently — and though it made no sense at all, for a moment she was utterly convinced that Maggie was controlling every single member of the herd at once.

But that couldn't be true. Could it?

It wasn't long before she heard squeals of pain from the paddock as the herd trampled back and forth, methodical in their stampede that wasn't a stampede so much as an organized run. Maggie made a sound of triumph deep in her throat as a handful of figures came tearing out of the paddock... and as they grew closer, Helena realized she could hear them bickering back and forth in the low, scratchy voices that had woken her from her sleep, growling and

snarling as they made a desperate bid to leap over the fence. The stampeding cattle behind them stopped at once, and the three figures turned to glare at Maggie.

Helena could barely see them in the gloom of the night — thick cloud cover meant that there was no moonlight or starlight to see by, and all she had to go by was the lantern hung up at the cottage's back door. But she could make out their silhouettes, hear their nasty, scraping voices... and remember enough of a book she'd leafed through in the Keep's library to know what she was looking at. Goblins. Three of them — much larger than the juvenile Darter, fully grown, with twisted, angry faces and sharp pointed teeth revealed by their snarling expressions.

"Leave," Maggie said, her voice a full octave lower than Helena had ever heard it — all three of the goblins recoiled instinctively in fear, and Helena felt suddenly grateful that she'd never been on Maggie's bad side in earnest. "Leave and don't return."

"Some trick," the middle-sized goblin snarled, his eyes gleaming. "Won't save you next time."

"I won't repeat myself."

They began to scamper away, giving Maggie a wide berth as they shuffled past and down the side of the house. Maggie followed, slow and majestic, her eyes narrowed, and fury emphasized in every line of her body. When they'd reached the front of the house, the three goblins stood on the road for a moment. By the way they moved, Helena realized with satisfaction, they'd taken a fair bit of damage from the stampeding herds. Good. Served them right for trying to make trouble in the dead of night.

"We'll be back," called the middle goblin, far louder than he needed to — and Helena realized with a grim shock of fear that his eyes were on the cottage, not on Maggie. "We'll be back to collect our little traitor, Darter Hob, don't you worry about that."

Maggie took a step forward, raising her hand — but before she could do whatever it was that she'd been intending to do, the three goblins scarpered, scampering off down the road and disappearing quickly into the gloom, growling, and snarling and speaking in their rasping voices to each other as they went. Helena looked down at Maggie, shocked by her strength, impressed as hell by the grim determination in every line of her body as she waited to make sure that the goblins were gone.

"Cowards," she said with some satisfaction. "Stupid cowards, too."

Imagine trying to make the herds of a Gruagach stampede. Come on," she added, a shadow crossing her face. "We'd best be getting back inside to Darter."

Worry gripped Helena as they headed for the door. It was fairly evident what was going on, here — those three goblins had called Darter by name. There was no other explanation — they were the ones he'd known back before he'd changed allegiances. Interfering with Maggie's herds hadn't been about stealing or harming the cattle — it had been a terror tactic, designed to wake up everyone in the house and probably plunge Darter into more panic than he was already in. Helena could only hope against hope, as she hastened up the steps to the cottage after Maggie, that he'd somehow avoided hearing what the goblins had screamed before disappearing off down the road.

But they were out of luck, it seemed. She could hear Darter sobbing in terror as soon as Maggie pulled the door to the cottage open — Kaitlyn was holding him tightly on the couch, but her own face was a mask of worry and fear, and when she looked up at Helena, she recognized vividly the expression on her face — it was the expression of someone who had no idea what to do, who felt powerless and confused and frustrated by her own inability to take action. Darter was shaking, stiff as a board as he sobbed and sobbed, his eyes clearly miles away, and though Kaitlyn kept crooning his name to him over and over, it was clear that he couldn't hear them — that he was miles away.

"They're gone, Darter," Maggie kept saying, her voice softer than Helena had ever heard it — she took a seat on the couch next to the pair, reaching out awkwardly to pat the little goblin's unresponsive shoulder. "We scared them off, the girls and I. Trampled them silly."

But Darter just kept shaking and sobbing, clinging tightly to Kaitlyn as he lay in the grips of whatever panic had taken hold of him. Eventually, the girl scooped him up and carried him to bed at Helena's quiet suggestion — she had a feeling the little goblin might need some time to himself to get back on top of his panic. She only hoped that a few of the tips and tricks she'd taught him would come in handy, that he'd be able to come out of his panic.

Unfortunately, this kind of terror — the kind that was justified, the kind that belonged to a clear and present threat and not just your horrible memories of a past situation — needed to be dealt with in multiple ways. She could give Darter all the therapy in the

world to no avail, because as long as those three goblins were out there, clearly determined to harm him in vengeance for what they saw as his betrayal, he'd never be able to feel truly safe.

She only hoped that Duncan and the rest of the residents of the Keep would be able to help. That they'd be able to track down the goblins and send them back through the Burgh... before it was too late.

Chapter 24

It took Helena a long time to get back to sleep after all the excitement in the fields, and when she woke in the morning, she felt bleary and not well rested. She sprang quickly out of bed anyway, dressing hastily and headed downstairs, hoping against hope to see Darter sitting at the kitchen table again... but to her dismay, he was nowhere to be seen. Kaitlyn and Maggie were sitting at the kitchen table eating toast, both looking about as weary as Helena felt, and she joined them for a quiet breakfast.

It was mid-morning by the time they managed to rouse Darter — Kaitlyn had taken him in some breakfast, which he hadn't touched, but she did manage to coax him out of his bedroom at least. He settled himself on the couch with a steaming mug of some kind of herbal tea that Maggie insisted on concocting — she'd been out early to gather the herbs for it. Whatever it was, it seemed to be helping a little, though whether that was the herbs themselves or just the simple act of care, the love that Maggie had expressed through the making of it, was anyone's guess. Darter wasn't shaking or sobbing the way he had been the night before, but the withdrawn, distracted expression on his face told her that he was well and truly back in the bad, traumatized place he had been that first day.

And fair enough, too, she thought with a sigh. PTSD was bad enough even when the source of the fear was long gone — the mind getting confused between past and present was often a significant element. But when the past trauma was being conflated with a real and present threat... well, that was even more difficult to get around. She hoped that what she'd taught him helped a little, and she sat with him for half an hour or so after breakfast, telling him quietly that he was safe, reminding him how powerful his friends and allies were, that there was a whole castle full of people who were going to make sure those goblins never got near him again.

Duncan came by just before lunch time, a satchel over his shoulder indicating that he was on his way to deliver messages to the surrounding area, but he quickly picked up on the news that

something was wrong when Maggie greeted him, unsmiling, at the door. Helena saw him switch from friendly visitor to Watchman almost in a heartbeat when Kaitlyn explained in a voice that shook only a little bit what had happened the night before — the attack of the goblins, the stampede of the herd, and the horrible threat that one of the goblins had screamed at the house before disappearing down the road in the opposite direction of the Keep.

Maggie stayed with Darter — or at least, stayed in the kitchen, strenuously pretending that she had important things to do in there while also staying within sight of Darter — while Helena, Kaitlyn and Duncan headed out to check on the herds. In the light of day, it was a lot easier to see what had happened the night before. The usually long grass had been trampled flat by the panicking herds, and the cows seemed a little restless, looking at Duncan with the whites of their eyes showing and shuffling back toward the back of the paddock as though not quite trusting him to treat them well.

"They've clearly been disturbed," he said softly, shaking his head. "Poor things."

"I didn't know Maggie could —" Helena hesitated, glancing sideways at Kaitlyn and Duncan, both of whom probably knew a lot more about Maggie than she did. "I didn't know she had such ... control, of the cattle."

"Oh, aye," Kaitlyn said brightly, her eyes gleaming. "Any cow on the planet will do exactly what Maggie wants it to do, no question. She's part Gruagach, you see. Ancient Fae herdsmen."

"So she says," Duncan said with a flick of his hand. "Hard to know what's true and what's false with Maggie. But the young lads in the village learn very quickly that interfering with Maggie's herds even for sport is a very, very bad idea."

They spent half an hour or so tracing the paddock carefully, hoping to find some tracks or something — any more information they could get about the goblins would be useful. In the end, they didn't find much. One of the cows was slightly injured, with a cut on its right hock that looked like it might need a little attention — Kaitlyn muttered something distracted about an herbal preparation. What they also found, squashed down into the grass, was a battered sword. It looked ugly and misshapen, but when Duncan picked it up his eyes widened.

"This is Fae steel," he said, narrowing his eyes as he studied it. "Very cheap low-quality stuff, but still Fae steel. One of the goblins

must have dropped it." He took a deep breath, looking worried. "I'm going to need to take a detailed account of what happened here back to the Keep, to fill in the Laird and the Captain of the Guard."

They traipsed back inside; the mood heavy. Wrinkling his nose, Duncan left the goblin sword on the porch before they headed in, mindful, Helena realized, of frightening poor Darter any more. The little goblin was sitting up when they got in, and she realized with an ache in her chest that his lips were moving, his eyes darting around the room as he named things under his breath. He was using the exercises she'd taught him to ground himself, to come back to the present, to get his panic under control.

Duncan sat down with Maggie at the kitchen table and she began a detailed account of what had happened last night, her voice low and clipped as she summarized the events with a cool, practical outlook that impressed Helena. Meanwhile, Kaitlyn and Helena sat down with Darter to see how he was doing. To Helena's acute relief, he spoke to them — his voice was soft, and his body was shaking, but he was back in the room with them, and that was progress.

"Duncan," he said finally, his voice barely louder than a whisper — but the man came over immediately, kneeling beside the couch to talk to him. "The goblins who came last night. I know them."

"Are you sure you're going to be okay to talk about this?" Helena asked softly, reaching out to touch his shoulder gently. "If you need a little time, it's okay —"

"They need to know," Darter said firmly. "The guards need to know who they are. I saw them, I saw all three of them, I know them, they —" He took a deep, shuddering breath, and Helena took his good hand in hers. He squeezed it gratefully before continuing. "The one — the one with gray skin and yellow eyes — his name's Ironjaw. He was Grimtooth's younger brother."

Duncan looked nonplussed, but Maggie and Kaitlyn exchanged worried glances. "Grimtooth was the leader of the goblin gang that Darter escaped from," Kaitlyn said softly, giving Darter a supportive little smile.

"They want revenge," Darter said bleakly. "Revenge on me for leaving them... and probably revenge on the Watch for the role it played in Grimtooth's death."

"I promise you, Darter, we're going to sort them out," Duncan said firmly. "Is it just the three of them?"

"For now," Maggie said, clicking her tongue. "The thing about

three goblins is that it means more goblins, sooner or later."

"That's right," Darter whispered. "And these three... they're bad news. They can cause plenty of trouble all by themselves. The Glashtyn... he's my cousin... you should put extra guards on the docks. And Grunt is huge — he's strong — tell your men to be careful if they come between him and his food —"

They talked a little longer — but Helena put a stop to it when she could see that the conversation was starting to get on top of Darter, who was trembling more and more the more they spoke. Duncan rose to his feet, gesturing with the little notebook he'd been taking thorough notes in and giving Darter a thankful smile.

"This is so helpful, Darter. Thank you so much for telling me this. I know it was hard," he said softly, "but you are very brave. We're going to sort them out. I promise you. We're going to put extra guards on the cottage here in case they come back to bother you. And now that we know who we're looking for, it's going to be that much easier to track them down."

Darter nodded, even managed a tremulous little smile — but Helena could tell he wasn't convinced. She stayed with Darter as Maggie walked Duncan out, wishing that she could have gotten a moment alone with him while he was here, maybe stolen a kiss or two... but knowing that right now, there were other priorities to be considered. Like the frightened, trembling little goblin boy.

"You are so brave," she told him softly. "Now you can leave it in the Watch's hands, okay? They'll make sure that we're all safe."

In the end, it turned out she'd been spot on. The Watch were very keen to make sure that Maggie and her strange little family here at the cottage were well taken care of. Duncan had only been gone for a few hours when four Watchmen turned up outside on horses, swords at their sides and grim expressions on their face. Darter fled to his bedroom — he had been in the habit of hiding from humans for a long time, it seemed, and this wasn't an unusual response — but after Maggie had been outside to talk with the guards, she bustled back inside to drag him out there to meet them. Helena came along too, curious to meet some of Duncan's fellows.

"Laird's orders," one of the watchmen said firmly, not flinching at the very strange sight of a little goblin peeking around the cottage's door. "There'll be four of us guarding the cottage around the clock. You all will be safe and sound." He tapped on the sword at his side, and Helena realized that Maggie was keeping her

distance, her nose wrinkled.

"I understand the need for iron," she told Helena later, that disgusted expression still on her face. "I just wish it didn't need to be so close to me."

By nightfall, though, Maggie seemed to have gotten used to the presence of the guards. It seemed to be helping cheer Darter up, too — he was moving about the cottage with much more confidence than he had before, and though there was still a worried look on his face, he was chatting normally and even joking with Maggie as they prepared a double-sized serving of stew for dinner, with Darter taking a few bowlfuls out to share with the guards who were on watch.

"The whole Keep's up in arms, it seems," Helena said to Maggie over dinner.

The woman nodded, a savage grin playing around her face as they ate their stew. "And well they should be. Darter and I have been staunch allies of the Keep for years. These goblins have picked a powerful enemy."

"I wonder how they chose the guards for this shift," Helena said idly, turning her gaze down to the stew as she spoke... but she should have known better than to try to keep what she was really asking from Maggie, who threw her head back and cackled.

"Why it wasn't your friend Duncan assigned to watch over the cottage, you mean?" she asked, eyes gleaming.

Helena felt a blush rise to her cheeks — but after all, what was the point of trying to keep any secrets from a witch like Maggie? "Is it really that obvious?"

"When you've seen the signs a thousand times before, yes," Maggie said dismissively, flicking her hand. "But no, you're reasonably subtle, for a young couple in love."

"It would be nice if he was stationed here, that's all." She could feel herself blushing, but she didn't care, at this point. "Didn't the Sidhe want us to be together?"

"Wouldn't set too much store by that, if I were you," Maggie said firmly, giving her a meaningful look.

Helena blinked, surprised by this new angle.

"Don't convince yourself that fate wants you to be together or you'll not bother with the difficult work that a relationship involves. Think of him as any other man, that's my advice. Any other man with an important job," she added with a shrug. "From what I

understand from those men out there, he's run ragged delivering messages about the goblins all the way up and down the Loch."

"That makes sense," Helena sighed.

"Aye, you'll have plenty of time to canoodle with him when all of this is over," Maggie said, rolling her eyes — though the tone she was using could have been a lot more scathing than it was, Helena couldn't help but notice with a secret smile. Maggie, for all her bluster, was being rather nice to her right now.

"I just hope they catch the goblins soon and send them back. For Darter's sake, mostly."

"Goblins aren't famous for their attention spans," Maggie said briskly. "I don't doubt that the three of them will lose focus on what they're trying to do sooner or later."

It was a reassuring thought. But it still took Helena a long time to get to sleep that night, listening to the wind through the roof, worried at every fresh gust that she could hear the sound of raspy voices, right on the edge of hearing...

Chapter 25

The days wore on. There was a tension in the air that hadn't been there before, and she could tell it was having an impact on Darter, keeping him worried and quiet even as the attack from the goblins receded from the immediate past. She kept working with him as much as she could, talking him through his fears, teaching him a few breathing exercises to help him through his panic... but she knew as well as he did that it was going to be a tall order to work through fear when the source of that fear was out there, wreaking havoc on the countryside.

Because the goblins were growing bolder. Over the next few days, word reached them again and again of brief altercations, usually at night, with the goblins — they were interfering with herds, frightening the cattle in the night, bothering travelers on the road and even robbing farms and buildings that lay on the outskirts of town. At first, the guards posted on the cottage kept them informed but didn't seem especially worried by what was going on — simple mischief, the harrying of animals or the bothering of travelers, wasn't exactly unusual for goblins and their Unseelie ilk.

So as if in response, the attacks began to escalate. Instead of just bothering animals, they started to go missing completely — several cows were reported missing, as well as a few sheep and a prized goat. The goat was particularly galling, as it was stolen right from the center of the village, in the middle of the day. Duncan was filling them in on that particular story one afternoon — he'd stopped in to say hello on his way through to deliver yet more messages around the area. Helena was grateful to see him, but frustrated that he couldn't stay for any longer than the time it took for him to eat a piece of toast.

"How the hell did they miss a whole goblin in the center of town?" Helena wanted to know, frustrated by what was going on — and especially by her powerlessness to do anything about it. "How did they just walk in and steal a whole goat?"

Maggie sighed, shaking her head. They were able to speak freely, at least for now — Darter and Kaitlyn were in the vegetable

garden down the back, harvesting some herbs Maggie had requested for the specific purpose of getting Darter out of the house so they could talk about the goblins without worrying about triggering another episode. "Wouldn't be surprised if those three figured out the knack of disguising themselves," she said heavily, shaking her head. "It's a low-level glamor that's easy enough to learn. They can look like regular humans. Indistinguishable."

"By magic?" Helena was fascinated — and more than a little frightened. The idea that the goblins might be able to disguise themselves so thoroughly hadn't occurred to her.

"Aye, by magic. Easy enough to see through, though, when you need to."

"How?"

"Cold iron," Maggie said with a grimace. "Press it to a human's flesh and it'll do nothing worse than give them a chill. Press it to the flesh of a Fae — even a Fae in disguise as a human — and it'll burn like pure lye. I know from experience," she added, sounding disgruntled. "Even the smell of it on the guards outside is unpleasant. The things we do for safety," she added with a roll of her eyes. "You make sure you catch these beasties quickly, Duncan Grant."

"I'm doing my best," he promised, his expression shadowed. "I'll pass on the information that these creatures may be disguising themselves, though, Maggie. That's useful. My thanks."

Helena walked him to his horse after afternoon tea, ignoring the way the guards on patrol exchanged amused glances with each other and spoke in low voices to see the two of them walking together. The whole Keep knew about their romance, at this point — and to her surprise, she'd realized she didn't mind much. Duncan smiled down at her once they were out of earshot of the other guards, taking her hands in his and giving them a squeeze as he sighed.

"I wish we could spend more time together than this," Helena admitted with a rueful smile. "You're doing important work, and I understand, but..."

"I miss you too," he said softly. "But listen. I've got a satchel full of messages to deliver, and I want to tell Captain Brendan about the goblins being able to disguise themselves. But if I can get all these messages delivered tonight, I've a free day tomorrow. What do you say we have lunch down by the lake?"

Helena beamed at him. "It's a date."

And this time, his eyes glinted. "I asked Julia what that means the last time you said it," he told her, a smile playing about his lips. She blushed, feeling a little caught out. "And it most certainly is, Helena Gray."

And with that, he was gone, leaving her staring after him with a mixture of impatience and excitement deep in her belly when she thought about how many hours still remained between now and tomorrow. But God, what a pleasant distraction. It got her through the dark evening, through the worried looks Darter kept shooting the windows at every gust of wind and idle sound. She even slept better than she had been, her sleep decorated by very pleasant dreams of a phantom Duncan taking her into his arms... and in the morning, she set about getting ready for her date, combing her hair, and braiding it carefully with Kaitlyn's enthusiastic help.

Duncan arrived right when he'd said he would, with a basket in his lap where he sat astride his horse — he swung down to greet her, stooping to kiss her hard enough to make her dizzy, ignoring the titters of the guards on patrol.

"Are we riding?"

"I thought we'd walk," he said, his eyes shining. "It's a beautiful day."

So, they tethered his horse to the tree outside Maggie's cottage and set off together down the road. The day was fine and bright, with a rare blue sky spread out above them. They walked for quite some time, well away from the quiet murmuring of the guards on watch, until the cottage was out of sight and all they could see was the trees and the Loch, spread out before them with its dark, choppy waves shining in the midday sun.

Duncan set up a pleasant little picnic for them down on the shore, with Helena standing by and looking up and down the shore. She couldn't help but wonder whether this was the exact spot he'd pulled her out of the water all those weeks ago... it felt like an eternity ago. It wasn't the same spot, of course — that lay beyond the Keep on the other side — but it may as well have been, the grass, the rocks... but this time, instead of huddling around a fire in the grips of a near-dissociative state of panic, Helena was settling down to a pleasant lunch on a tartan blanket spread out to protect the two of them from the slightly damp grass.

It was a delicious lunch — but what was even better was finally

getting some time to herself with Duncan. They talked and laughed about tiny things, inconsequential things — she told him about how it had been in the cottage with Darter, Maggie and Kaitlyn and he filled her in on all the trips he'd been taking up and down the shore of the Loch, delivering message after message about the goblins. He was a little tired — it seemed he'd been out late the night before, making sure all his messages were delivered to ensure that today was clear for their lunch together — and she was so touched by the gesture that she couldn't help but reach up and press a kiss to his lips.

He responded with an enthusiasm that quickly took her breath away, and it wasn't long before the two of them were lying down on the picnic blanket with the warm sun beating down on them, pushing the plates and remnants of food out of the way as he rolled her into his arms and held her close. Her body was humming with pleasure, with the sheer joy of being so close to him, of having him all to herself in private for once... at least, she was fairly certain they were in private. They were some distance down the slope toward the Loch, out of sight from the road above them, and unless someone was peering at them from the waters of the lake, she had a feeling they were alone... though she couldn't help giggling a little at the thought of the Loch Ness Monster spying on them.

The heat between them grew, and Helena could feel that they were heading for that familiar place — that point of passion where he'd pull back, smile at her while he caught his breath, then say his farewells. But she didn't want that, this time. She'd been waiting for so long to have some time to herself with him. She'd even gathered up the courage to talk to Maggie about contraceptive herbs, and after a great deal of cackling the old woman informed her that there was a tea that could be taken once a week that would prevent any unintended pregnancies. She'd had some that very morning just in case something just like this happened... and when Duncan went to pull away, she gave him the most meaningful look she could as she pulled him close to her again, possessive, more demanding than she'd ever been with a lover.

But he seemed to understand what she wanted... and, more to the point, he seemed more than willing to give it to her. Her eyes fluttered shut and she groaned in pleasure as he redoubled his efforts, his hands roaming across her body and seeming to start fires everywhere they touched, even where the fabric of her dress kept

him from making real contact — and before long she found herself aching for him, desperate, her body on fire as her hands seemed to roam across his frame without her permission, dipping scandalously low and finally untying the laces of his pants. He groaned, threw his head back — and then in one fell swoop reversed their positions, flattening her on her back on the blanket as he hovered above her, his eyes dark with desire.

"Are you sure?" he breathed; his voice hoarse with wanting her...

And she nodded, a dizzy smile breaking out over her face at the tenderness, the respect he showed her even when his own need was so clear...

She pulled down his pants and felt his manhood spring free of its confines — meanwhile, he was working to gather up her skirts, pulling them out of the way, ripping her underthings down too to give himself access to her most intimate place. She could feel the heat between her legs as he caressed her with one hand, teasing her, gently parting her folds to stroke at the sensitive place in her depths, sending pleasure arcing through her body like lightning... she muffled a cry of pleasure, mindful of bringing the guards running, and spread her legs, urging him wordlessly to get on with it, to give her what she so badly needed, what she'd wanted since the day they'd met...

And then he buried himself to the hilt inside her, and she felt her vision blur as pleasure exploded through her. He felt so unbelievably good... it was as though their bodies were made for each other, as though every jerk of his hips struck her in that sensitive place deep inside her, driving her on mercilessly toward her orgasm. Moaning and whimpering, it was all she could do to cling to him, folding her legs around his back to draw him closer, rocking herself up to meet his thrusts as they set up a rapid rhythm that was clearly bringing them both closer and closer to the edge of their climax. It was strange — she'd so rarely experienced this much pleasure with a partner, usually needing to rely on her own hands, her own expertise to draw her close to orgasm... but with Duncan, she could barely hold herself back. They crashed over the edge together, Duncan groaning against her throat to stifle the sound, and Helena felt an unbelievable sense of peace creep into her body as the two of them lay there, tangled in the blanket.

The warm afternoon sun bathed their sweaty bodies as they

basked for a very long time in the afterglow of their lovemaking.

Chapter 26

They headed back to the cottage as the sun crept lower and lower in the sky. She couldn't help but feel wistful that he was heading back to the Keep without her, but she was determined to be brave. The afternoon they'd spent together had been utterly magical... it would be greedy to want more, wouldn't it? But he seemed to feel the same way — he lingered unnecessarily as they said their goodbyes by the tree, and even the guards on post quickly stopped calling their teasing little jokes about young love when they saw how tenderly he touched her cheek when he bid her goodnight.

She felt like she was floating on a cloud that entire evening. Her mind kept drifting back to the time they'd spent together by the Loch, making love over and over in the afternoon sun... she got a few teasing comments from Maggie, and a few mystified looks from Darter, who didn't understand anything that was going on, but overall, she had the impression that her friends were pleased that she'd found something that brought her so much happiness. She found herself looking forward to seeing him again — she was growing impatient with the slow progress of the attempts at capturing the goblins. Once the goblins were sorted, she could go back to the Keep and see Duncan every day. That was what she was holding out for.

Her dreams were rich and full of exciting new details she'd learned from her afternoon with Duncan... but when she woke up in the morning, there was something in the air that set worry in her gut. Sure enough, when she'd dressed and hurried downstairs, it was to find a grim-faced assembly at the kitchen table. Not only Maggie, Kaitlyn, and Darter — but Brendan, too, the Captain of the Guard, with a stony look on his face where he sat at the table with a piece of toast half-eaten on the plate in front of him.

"Bad news," was all Maggie said, shaking her head.

Panic gripped Helena, and she spoke without thinking. "Is Duncan alright?"

Brendan blinked, looking confused. "What? I think so. Haven't seen him. No — there's been an attack. The three goblins, we're

fairly certain — they struck the docks at the Keep and set more than a dozen boats alight."

Maggie shook her head, her face grim. "They're getting terribly bold."

Helena was distracted by her worry for Duncan — why hadn't Brendan seen him? He'd been heading back to the Keep when she'd last seen him, reporting for watch duty in the morning — had something happened on his way? Could he have been waylaid by the goblins... or worse? But her eyes flicked to Darter, who looked petrified, his face drawn even as he sat bravely at the table, clearly determined to be present for this conversation. No — she wasn't going to bring up the possibility that Duncan had been hurt by the goblins. The idea of his friend being hurt might be too much for Darter to take right now.

"Press iron to the throat of every man present," Maggie was saying, shaking her head with a grim look on her face. "These creatures are capable of disguising themselves."

"If they've been bold enough to attack the Keep, I don't know what they might try next," Brendan was saying with a shake of his head. "I'm on my way down to the village now, to warn the village elders to strengthen the patrols. They're stronger than your average goblins — they need to have more men on each patrol."

"Ironjaw's a famously tough fighter," Darter said, his voice trembling but audible. "And Grunt, the big one... he's as strong as five human men, maybe more. Watch out for Ironjaw's weapons. He uses arrows tipped with a paralyzing venom..."

Brendan nodded, writing that down on a scrap of parchment that was sitting beside his plate. "That's useful information, Darter. My thanks."

Helena felt a swell of pride and affection for the little goblin as he raised his chin, clearly pleased by the praise. He really was doing his absolute best to be there for his friends, to help however he could, despite his own fear...

But unfortunately, fear was becoming Helena's constant companion, too. After Brendan left, she headed out to chat to the worried guards outside, hoping one of them might know where Duncan had gotten to if he hadn't made it to the castle — but they were too distracted by their worries about the goblins attacking the Keep itself, by wanting to be back there to defend their home. The closest thing to a location for Duncan she was able to get was a

shrug from one of them who'd been there the day before and had heard Duncan say that he was heading back to the Keep. But he wasn't there. So, where was he?

The day passed slowly. She was distracted, worried... she became aware at one point that Darter was actually following her around, trying to cheer her up, and she couldn't help but be amused by the little goblin's determination. It was funny, how trying to help someone else could so often help you with your own fears... as he jollied her along, she couldn't help but notice how much less frightened he seemed about the goblins. Determined to return the favor, she helped him in the garden with his chores for the rest of the afternoon... but her worry returned tenfold when night came, and Duncan didn't materialize with an explanation for why he'd been missing.

By the time she was heading up to bed, her worry had turned to outright panic. Duncan had promised he'd stop by today sometime on his patrols — but they hadn't seen hide nor hair of him, nor had they received any messages. That was unlike him — even Maggie agreed — and when she settled into bed, she knew deep in her bones that she wasn't going to be getting any sleep tonight. She lay there for what felt like hours, tossing, and turning, dreaming she could hear his voice calling to her... wait. That wasn't a dream. She sat up in bed, straining to hear it again — yes! His voice, outside, calling to her... she frowned, confused. He must be around the side of the cottage, to be calling up to her like this. But why? Had Maggie barred the door?

It didn't matter. She rose quickly, and almost bolted straight down in her night-dress before remembering that there were other guards out there and dressing quickly. She could still hear Duncan, calling for her, and it made her fingers fly faster as she put on her boots, and grabbed the sash she usually wore with this dress, the one that had space for the knife he'd given her.. She grinned to herself as she fastened it, realizing the little iron dagger was still packed in with leftovers from the picnic — a collection of sweet baked buns that Duncan had brought along from the Keep's kitchen. He'd added the dagger to the basket as a precaution, not wanting her to be without the iron if the goblins attacked. She quickly grabbed the dagger she caught a whiff of the sweet breads she'd forgotten to share with Maggie and Darter and Kaitlyn... well, maybe they'd make a nice midnight snack...

It was pitch dark in the cottage's garden when she emerged, and she blinked as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The clouds had come over again, obscuring the moonlight and making it impossible to see out here. But Duncan usually had a lantern with him when he went riding at night, didn't he? Where was that familiar prick of light? Nowhere to be seen... nor, to her surprise, were any of the guards who were usually stationed out here. Their things were still here — their spare cloaks to keep them warm, their spare torches — but the men themselves were nowhere to be seen. She felt a prickle of unease. What could have drawn them from their posts? Had they headed off to investigate some strange sound, perhaps?

But then she heard her name on Duncan's lips again, and she turned, her worry about the guards forgotten in the relief of seeing him standing there, down by the side of the house, covered by the shadow. It was him, though — she'd known his height, the silhouette of him anywhere, even in the darkness. She pulled her cloak around her and hastened closer, grinning broadly, waiting for him to rush to her and take him in her arms — but he stayed back. She tilted her head, curious... then a wicked smile curved her lips. Was he inviting her around the back of the house, out of sight of any curious eyes? Well, she didn't have to be told twice... she followed him around to the back of the house, where it was a little easier to see out of the shadow of the building.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, too impatient to stay quiet any longer. "We were so worried — we didn't hear from you —"

She saw him nod, but he didn't speak — didn't do anything to explain just where he'd been, what had happened to stop him from giving them word of where he'd gone. That was unlike him, and a prickle of worry took hold of her belly as she crept closer.

"Duncan? What's going on?"

"Come here," he said finally, and she smiled, so relieved to hear his voice that she forgot her misgivings. She ran into his arms, delighted to wrap herself around him, to hold him close... she buried her face in the warmth of his chest and took a deep breath of the familiar scent of him... then stopped, frowning. He must have felt her go stiff, because his arms tightened around her a little, as if questioning her.

"Duncan —" His arms gripped her tighter — too tight. Tight enough to hurt. He didn't smell right. His body was hard and stiff

where it was usually warm and strong, his arms digging into her unpleasantly... but it was the smell that was really wrong. He smelled like stagnant water, like a pond that had been standing for years, flies buzzing over its surface... and when she tried to pull back, she felt his arms tighten yet again, his face lowering to scrape his beard against her cheek as he pressed a kiss against her face. Revulsion flared in her body, quick as fire. Whoever this was, it wasn't her lover, wasn't her Duncan, wasn't the man who'd taken her in his arms by the lake that afternoon and made her feel like she was flying...

But panic was beginning to build in her as he refused to let her go. She gritted her teeth, tugging herself away, feeling her boots dig into the soil beneath their feet as she fought for purchase. A new tactic occurred to her and she wiggled furiously as though trying to get away, opening her mouth to scream for help before feeling his hand come up to clamp down hard over her mouth. That gave her the opening she needed to grab the iron blade from her pouch and press it against the skin at his throat.

The reaction was immediate and overwhelming. It was as though she'd plunged a red-hot blade into a bucket of water — the sizzling sound it made was so loud and so close to her ear that she shrieked in surprise and stumbled backwards. But her shriek was drowned out by the hoarse, burbling yell of pain and rage that the creature who certainly wasn't Duncan uttered as it staggered backwards, its hand flying up to the great gaping wound at its throat. She could barely make it out in the gloom of the night — all she could really see were shadows — but there was something wrong. Something about not-Duncan's face, flickering strangely in the shadows, his body warping and shifting as he staggered toward her, his melting face twisting in rage.

It was the most obvious thing in the world. The knife was still in her hand, her heart pounding hard — and when he rushed her, she simply lifted it in self-defense, and felt it bury itself to the hilt in his chest. It went in like a knife into hot butter, not a blade into flesh and bone, and she gasped in horror as the creature screamed in agony and curled into a ball around the knife, dropping to the ground as though it had been a broadsword that had gone into its ribs, not a tiny iron blade. There was an awful sizzling sound, as though the creature was bubbling and melting, and when she stared down at it, she saw it shrinking, returning to a size that was much

more in keeping with a goblin than a man... and something told her, some deep instinct leftover from her primordial ancestors, that she was looking at a corpse, not a living creature.

Heart pounding, she was about to turn on her heel and flee inside when the other two rushed out. First the enormous one that Darter had called Grunt, blocking her from running back around to the front of the house — then the second one, the middle-sized one that had screamed at the house to terrify Darter. His face was twisted in rage as he looked down at his fallen lieutenant, and his ugly yellow eyes fixed on Helena's face just as she realized that she'd let go of the hilt of the knife when she'd stabbed the third goblin, the creature that was now collapsed with the life running out of it...

For a moment, she considered running. But before she could, the ringleader goblin — the one that Darter had called Ironjaw — drew a short bow from his back and loosed an arrow with terrifying speed, straight into her shoulder. She felt it tear through the fabric of her gown as though it was made of paper and she screamed in pain — but even as she screamed, she felt the strength go out of her. What was going on? She dropped to her knees, terrified that she was already bleeding out, that the injury had somehow killed her with one blow... but as she looked at the smug face of the goblin before her, she remembered what Darter had said about Ironjaw's weapon. Venom... the arrows were tipped with venom... she needed to warn Maggie, needed to let someone know... but before she could so much as scream again, she felt blackness rush up to claim her, and her consciousness was gone.

Chapter 27

Helena woke slowly, already so full of fear that she could barely bring herself to move. She took a deep breath, winced as she felt pain lance through the wound in her shoulder, squeezed her eyes shut as her memories came rushing back of the last few minutes before she'd fallen unconscious. After she'd dropped to her knees, she had a few quick glimpses of memory — the feeling of the enormous goblin scooping her effortlessly into his arms and slinging her over his shoulder, Ironjaw cackling with glee as they started walking away from the cottage, down the road and into the distance...

But where was she now? She must have passed out on the road. She opened her eyes carefully and looked around — the distant flicker of torchlight lit up what looked to be an enormous cave, dank and humid. There were caves a few miles from the Keep, she knew that much from the guards' gossip about where the Monster went to sleep during the day... was that where she was? Holed up in a cave with... she caught her breath. Over there was the enormous form of the goblin called Grunt, lying by a little fire. He had his back to her, but she could tell his head was angled up to be looking at the other goblin, who was sitting on the other side of the fire. Was it his voice that had woken her? She kept still, not wanting to let them know she was listening, hoping against hope that she might learn something from whatever they were speaking about.

"— the fool deserved to die if he let her get at him with iron like that," Ironjaw was saying. It was surprising how clearly he spoke with a mouth full of such sharp, pointed teeth — she felt herself shiver a little as she looked at him, wondered exactly how they'd all gotten such dark, blood-like stains... it seemed that he had more weapons than the sword at his belt and the bow that was set on the cave floor beside him, his quiver of arrows beside it. That was what had poisoned her, knocked her out... she could still feel the after-effects of the poison now, but to her relief it felt like it was clearing up. A temporary effect, then — she still had full use of her fingers

and toes, too. That was good. With that, she could start making a plan.

"Girl had iron," Grunt intoned, his voice much deeper than his leader's. "Girl has more iron?"

"Of course she doesn't, you great goon," Ironjaw said with a roll of his eyes, and the careless cruelty of his voice told her that he often insulted his lieutenant for fun. "Wouldn't we have smelled it on her? I wish I wasn't the only one around here with a brain. I bet my brother's men were smarter than you two idiots. You one idiot," he corrected himself, rolling his eyes again as though his other lieutenant's death had been specifically carried out to inconvenience him. "May he rest in peace, the fool."

Good. That confirmed the suspicion she'd been nursing since the encounter at the cottage — the suspicion that she'd killed the goblin who had been impersonating her lover. It felt strange, to know that she'd killed someone — someone sentient, someone with thoughts and feelings. Someone, she reminded herself sharply, who had been pretending to be the man she... well, the man she liked very much and was definitely going to think about whether or not she loved him as soon as she was out of this cave. Unfortunately, that wasn't looking like a particularly likely future for her right now, not with the goblins sitting in between her and what looked like the only exit to the cave. There was a little light trickling in from the far end, but not much — she had a suspicion they were deep in a system of caves, and that it would take quite some time to escape... even if she could get away from the goblins.

Only two goblins, though. That gave her hope. Surely one of them would have to leave at some point, leaving her with just the other one to deal with... Grunt seemed fairly stupid. Maybe she could outwit him. Her mind was racing, and she must have shifted her weight, made some noise to alert them both, because before she knew it, she was face to face with Ironjaw, his ugly little face wrinkled in a smug, victorious smile that made her chin crawl.

The cave was low — Grunt, who was almost her height, could barely stand up in it, but Ironjaw was happy enough to stand at his full height. He was as tall as maybe a ten-year-old child — she was taller than him, she knew that, but right now with her prone on the ground with her hands bound, he was looming over her. He seemed to enjoy it, too — he cast a boasting glance over his shoulder toward Grunt, who was still sitting by the fire, staring vacantly over

his shoulder at them as though he'd forgotten that she was there. Maybe he had.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the murderess, awake at last. That was some stunt you pulled with our poor dear Needleteeth. Did you enjoy taking his life from him?"

She narrowed her eyes, seeing right through this attempt at manipulation. "He tried to kill me, twice. I was defending myself."

Ironjaw waved a hand dismissively, making an unpleasant little grunt deep in his throat as he realized that that tactic wasn't going to get far with her. Then he turned back, offering her an obsequious little bow with that same mocking smirk on his face. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ironjaw, brother and avenger of Grimtooth, who your cruel race killed in cold blood."

"I had nothing to do with that," she pointed out, narrowing her eyes — and deciding against pointing out that Grimtooth had been trying to bring about a goblin horde large enough to overrun the whole area, robbing and killing the peaceful humans who lived here. Somehow, she had a suspicion that right now wasn't the time for a moral discussion about killing. "I didn't arrive here until long after he passed away."

"I don't care," Ironjaw said with a scoff. "Don't give a shit about you or anything you have to say, to be perfectly frank. We can be honest, can't we? We're friends here, aren't we, Grunt?"

The goblin stared for a long moment; his expression vacant. "Girl is friend? I thought girl was prisoner."

Ironjaw rubbed his forehead. "I miss Needleteeth," he said under his breath, more to himself than anyone else. "He always understood." Unexpectedly, he kicked her in the shin — she uttered a yelp of pain and scooted her legs back away from him, narrowing her eyes in annoyance. He cackled, his raspy voice echoing from the walls of the cave. "Oh, yes, there'll be more of that if you're not careful, you little bitch. You'll note I didn't ask your name. Don't care what it is. Only care about you for what you can do for us. Bait. You're just so much meat —"

"Meat?" That had caught Grunt's attention — he was scrambling to his feet, almost bumping his head on the low patch of the ceiling, and Ironjaw made a frustrated sound in his throat.

"Not real meat, just — it's a figure of speech, you stupid — sit back down," he snapped, reaching into the pouch slung around his hips and throwing what looked like a piece of moldy, stale bread to

Grunt. The larger goblin caught it and devoured it happily, his face shining animatedly until the last scraps were finished — then he turned back to the fire like some kind of great machine that was powering down. A lot of Helena's work had to do with figuring out what motivated people... and she had a suspicion that she'd solved that particular puzzle when it came to Grunt.

But what about Ironjaw? He seemed a little more complicated. "What do you want from me?" she asked cautiously, wondering what he'd meant about using her as bait.

He scoffed. "Isn't it obvious? It's clear that those humans, the bastards in the Keep, think you're important. They want you as a pet or a whore or whatever, I don't know why human men keep women around the way they do," he added with a roll of his ugly little yellow eyes. "At any rate, once they realize where you are, they'll come to find you — and I'll finally have my revenge."

"For your brother?"

"Yes, for my brother," he snapped. "For my brave, noble brother who was going to lead us all into a new life. A life where we were in charge for once, instead of cringing and begging for scraps around the Unseelie court. Pathetic life, back there beyond the Burgh. Here, we can be powerful. There's enough land to go around, enough riches, enough food — sit down, Grunt," he snapped again, and the hopeful expression on Grunt's face died. "But you humans had to take that from us, didn't you?"

That was a pretty wild interpretation of an aggressive invasion being stopped... but she didn't especially want to get kicked again, so she just nodded, using her best Thoughtful Therapist face to make him feel like he was being listened to. "I hadn't thought about it like that. I'm sorry for what you've gone through. Losing your brother must have been hard."

Ironjaw looked taken aback, as though he hadn't been expecting that from her. That was usually the case, with these violent men — they hadn't experienced enough tenderness, enough listening in their life, so it often came as a surprise when they finally got it. Of course, that didn't mean she was safe. He could just as easily snap and turn on her again, get insecure about her making him feel vulnerable... this was a dangerous game. But keeping him talking seemed like the best option. At least until her friends could figure out where she was... she frowned down at her dress, realizing that it was torn and tattered. When had that happened?

"Oh, you're wondering about your clothing adjustments?" Ironjaw asked, a sneer on his lips. "Well, don't feel too flattered. Human women aren't my type. I just needed to leave a few clues," he said with a sneer. "A few scraps of fabric to lead them to you."

"You tore my dress to — to leave deliberate clues of where I was?" She played dumb, widened her eyes, hoping to play into his obvious superiority complex. "Why would you want them to find you?"

"So they get lost in this cave complex and me and Grunt can pick them off one by one, of course," Ironjaw said with a grin on his ugly face. "That old woman, that great big idiot that Needleteeth was impersonating when he died..." An ugly expression flickered across his face, something dark and twisted... "And especially that no-good excuse for a glashtyn, that cripple."

"Darter," she said softly, feeling a pang of grief for the little boy. He'd be so worried about her when he realized she was gone, when he realized what must have happened to her... she just hoped he wouldn't blame himself. And she hoped she'd taught him enough to stop him from falling too deeply into panic to draw himself back out again...

"Oh, yes. Darter Hob, that piece of pond scum. I'm going to enjoy cutting him up, piece by piece," Ironjaw said, a wicked grin curling across his lips. "So, you'd best get some rest, missy. There's a lot of fun coming up for us."

Chapter 28

They didn't bother feeding her. She watched as they settled in for their own meal — it must have been dinnertime, she supposed, though it was impossible to tell with only the light of the flickering little fire and a couple of torches to go by. At any rate, she wouldn't have wanted any of the food the two of them were sharing... the bread looked moldy and the meat half-rotten, but they tucked in with evident enjoyment, Grunt wolfing down his own double helping faster than even Ironjaw could keep up. The leader kept spitting curses at him, telling him to slow down, not to make him regret giving him Needleteeth's share of the food — it was pretty clear, as far as Helena could tell, what exactly the mechanism of control Ironjaw held over Grunt was. It was all about food.

And when you knew what motivated someone, you could manipulate them.

After dinner, Ironjaw declared he was going on patrol — he wanted to see if any humans had stumbled into the traps that he'd set in the caves above them, and she felt a chill run down her spine at the thought of someone searching for her and getting snared, Ironjaw finding them and gloating as he withdrew his wicked blade to menace them... she took a deep breath to steady her nerves as he left Grunt to guard her. This was an opportunity. Frightened as she was, she could use this moment to start building a relationship.

"Hey," she said softly, putting her gentlest smile on. "Did he say your name was Grunt?"

Grunt — grunted. She fought the urge to laugh. It might not have been his name so much as a description — but it would do for now. "My name's Helena," she told him. "I saw that you were enjoying your dinner. Would you like a little more food?" The goblin stared at her, his yellow eyes wider than she'd ever seen them — which wasn't very wide, given how close-set they were in his piggy little face, but still, the expression was very clear in its meaning. She smiled at him. "The only rule is... you can't tell Ironjaw. Okay? Because then he might want all of the rest... and then you and I won't have any to share!"

Grunt stared at her for a long moment, and she began to worry that this was too complicated for him... or worse, that he'd sensed she was trying to manipulate him, and was going to tell on her to Ironjaw. The casual cruelty he'd already exhibited had told her well and truly that he would be more than willing to harm her in response. But then finally, something like a grin spread across his face, revealing a mouthful of broken, jagged teeth — his jaw, it seemed, was too strong for his teeth, and it looked like he'd cracked and broken them by biting too hard... or maybe simply by clenching his jaw. It was a frightening sight... but an encouraging gesture. "Share," he said simply, extending his hand. "Secret share."

Well, that was about as close as she was going to get to a promise from him, she supposed. Reaching into the pouch of her sash, she withdrew one of the biscuits she and Duncan had shared by the shore of the Loch, feeling a pang of real grief at the thought of him. God, she hoped he knew where she was... God, she hoped he'd come and find her, though the fear beat so hard against her chest she could barely hang onto that hope. But she handed Grunt the biscuit, and he took it with surprising gentleness. She took out one of her own, too, and the two of them ate them together, as though in some kind of strange ritual. Grunt gave her one more big smile when he'd finished the biscuit.

"Secret," he said softly, nodding to himself. Then he turned away and lay down by the fire with his back to her — and she was left with a horrible choice to make. Could she run away right now? The goblin was snoring gently, clearly fast asleep now that he'd eaten... and Ironjaw was nowhere to be seen, no doubt patrolling the caves somewhere. Maybe she could make a break for it... maybe there was a chance she could get out before he found her, figure out where she was, run to safety... but even thinking it through, she was taken aback by what a long shot it all was. So many opportunities for things to go horribly wrong... and she'd be endangering the fragile alliance she'd just built with Grunt.

No — as much as it grieved her to stay here, she knew she had to. At least until she knew more about the cave system she was trapped in, the beasts who had trapped her... and exactly where they were. She could hear the distant sound of the Loch's waters, and it was damp and dripping in this cave, so she knew they were close to the Loch... but that wasn't enough information. Not yet. No — she had to bide her time, to save her escape attempt until the

optimal moment.

She just hoped she'd make it until then... and that in the meantime, the goblins didn't succeed in hurting her friends. She took some solace in the knowledge that she'd taken one of them out, though... and as long as the two of them were guarding her here in this cave, which meant they weren't out there hurting cattle and hassling travelers. She could do this. She just needed to be strong, to bide her time... and to hope like hell that her friends were coming. With these thoughts in mind, she was able to settle down on the cold, wet floor of the cave and drift into a shivering, wretched sleep. She just had to be brave and stick this out. That was all there was to it.

But as the day wore on and rescue didn't come, it became harder and harder to stick to her guns. She kept trying to build the fragile rapport with Grunt, who was always thrilled to be given a little bit of food from her rapidly dwindling supply — but it quickly became clear that neither goblin had any intention of sharing any food or water with her. It was hard to keep track of how much time had passed, but she could tell by the dryness in her mouth and the ache in her belly that she was going to need some sustenance soon.

"Ironjaw — could I trouble you for a little water?" she tried once. "Even just from the Loch —"

But he'd just laughed at her and kicked some damp sand from the cave floor over toward her. He and Grunt were gnawing on pieces of what looked like raw fish — perhaps plucked from the Loch itself? She could never figure out any rhyme or reason to their meals — at first, she'd assumed they ate morning and night, but that didn't seem quite right for the way the time seemed to be passing, and she was quickly getting very confused about what time it was, whether it was day or night, and how long she'd actually been here...

"What, you're wanting me to wait on you like your little handmaiden?" Ironjaw demanded, his cruel face twisting in mockery. "Bring you a little cup of water, shall I? With my pinkie finger stuck out like a little lord —"

"I'll die if you don't give me water," she said, hearing her voice break and hating her own weakness. "Please — just a few sips —"

"I don't care if you die," Ironjaw said blankly, his face twisting with what was a lot closer to rage than malice. Bleak, black hatred in his eyes, he crept closer to her, lifting one razor-sharp talon to

point right at her face... and she swallowed hard, suddenly frightened that she'd pushed it too far, asked for too much... "Nobody cared if my brother died, did they? Nobody gave a single solitary shit about his death. He deserved a hero's burial — instead his body was simply tossed into the Loch to be eaten by that dog of a Monster. I'm glad I cut a hole in her," he snarled, making a gesture with his talons that indicated exactly what he'd used to wound her. "It's what she deserves. Pity it didn't fester."

"You're bringing more trouble on yourself than you know," she said desperately. This had been a tactic she'd been working on — it was risky, but she had to try something, at this point. A person could only survive a few days without water. Playing it safe wouldn't help her if it meant she died of thirst waiting to be rescued. "There are only two of you... and the Keep has dozens of men, probably over a hundred if you count the militia from the village."

"All the better," Ironjaw snarled... and for the first time, she saw the glimmer of true madness reflected in his eyes. "Bring them all, I say. All one hundred of them... their blood will fill this cave to honor my brother and let him finally rest." His eyes glittered. "You can drink your fill then, how does that sound?"

And then he was gone, stomping off into the complicated cave system beyond the one they were camped out in, barking an instruction to Grunt to keep an eye on her. Obediently, the goblin rolled over where he was lying by the fire... and stared at her blankly as she collapsed to the cave floor and sobbed weakly, feeling tears rolling down her cheeks and sobbing harder when she realized she couldn't afford to lose the moisture...

And then, to her shock, she felt the great goblin move up beside her. He pressed something into her hand — it was cool to the touch and it sloshed when she moved it. It was some kind of skin, like the wineskins she'd seen in the kitchens at the Keep... and her eyes widened as she realized what he'd given her.

"Secret," he said blandly... and before he could take it back, she uncorked it and drank deeply. It tasted unbelievably sweet and delicious — not wine but cool, clear water, and she drank and drank and drank, frightened that Grunt might take it away from her, that she might not get another chance... and when her thirst was finally slaked, she handed it back to him, about to burst into tears again with gratitude.

"Thank you, Grunt. Thank you." And on impulse, she reached into her sash and pulled out the remaining stash of biscuits. There were only three left, and she hesitated for a moment — but Grunt had saved her life. She'd last a lot longer without food than she would without water. So with one last smile, she put all three of the biscuits into his hands. He looked at her for a long moment... then quietly put one of the biscuits into his mouth, the other into her hands, and took the third with him as he returned to the fire to sleep.

She lay there for a long time after she'd eaten the biscuit, staring at the back of Grunt's head, wishing she knew how to thank him. Her mind was racing... was there some way she could use this streak of kindness he'd demonstrated to her own advantage? Maybe he'd let her escape, if she asked him to... was he even intelligent enough to do that? Everything he'd done so far had been motivated by food. It was impossible to know... and she couldn't risk any mistakes, not right now. Not with Ironjaw so mad, so determined to see her dead — as well as all of her friends. She had no doubt in her mind that if Ironjaw told Grunt to kill her, he would.

Still — she hoped, somehow, that she could find a way to repay his kindness. That skinful of water was the difference between life and death.

At least for a few days... and after all, what else did they have?

Chapter 29

She began to lose hope, though, after that. The hours seemed to slip by faster and faster, and though Grunt continued to sneak her little sips of water from his skin, she couldn't be sure it wasn't just a kneejerk response, an attempt at winning some extra food. He always looked puzzled when she had nothing to give him, for all the world like a man pressing the button on a vending machine over and over again, waiting patiently for his desired product to fall down. At least he wasn't getting frustrated. He had a stoic kind of patience, this goblin.

The same could not be said for Ironjaw. He was clearly growing restless, holed up in this cave with the two of them. Helena had stopped responding to his circuitous, rambling rants about how badly his brother had been wronged, how sweet their vengeance truly would be, and as a result he seemed to have stopped monologuing, at least to her — she still heard him muttering to himself sometimes as he stomped about the cave. They were running out of food, she suspected — he seemed to be rationing it more and more, and Grunt was getting resentful of his smaller and smaller portions. That might come in handy, that growing rift... if she could find some way to exploit it, of course.

But she didn't think she could. She was losing hope, losing her mind a little... part of her still clinging to the knowledge of how clever her friends were, how brave. Especially Duncan. He'd be here soon, she told herself over and over until the words began to lose their meaning... he'd come for her, he'd turn up in the cave door and carry her to safety... but the more hours passed without any sign of him, the more she began to feel that she was going to die in here. Her body felt strange, weak, and frail, no energy left to draw on but her own fat stores... which wouldn't last long, she knew. Every time Grunt snuck her water, she worried it would be the last time... and then, she realized grimly, she started hoping it would. What was the point of dying like this, in a cave with two stinky goblins? Better to take a knife to the throat in battle, surely... to go out fighting. Die hard, die kicking... that had been a lyric in a song,

hadn't it?

She was beginning to get delirious when she heard the sound of hoofbeats, so distant that she was convinced they were a hallucination. Hoofbeats, drumming on the soil above her head... she closed her eyes, lulled by the sound, imaginary as it might have been... that was, until Ironjaw swore under his breath and sat bolt upright, indicating that he, too, could hear the hoofbeats. Excitement, ugly and twisted, wreathed his face, and she felt a chill run down her spine even as adrenalin shot into her body. Hoofbeats. Could it be...? Could Duncan have finally come to rescue her?

"Showtime," Ironjaw whispered, his eyes alight with glee as he reached for his bow and his quiver of poisoned arrows. Terror shot through her as she imagined Duncan being paralyzed and beaten to death by the enormous Grunt, who was getting to his feet obediently, clearly excited by Ironjaw's energy, even though it didn't sound like he could hear the hoofbeats himself. She propped herself up on her elbows, blinking blearily as she tried to focus her eyes. The cave held more shadows than usual... or was it just that she was slipping away?

Panic gripped her, panic, and desperation. Ironjaw was telling Grunt to go out into the cave, to beat the hell out of whoever he found out there while he got his arrows ready... and though it was wrong, and desperate, and stupid, she lost control completely. A scream ripped its way out of her throat, wild, and high, and desperate, a sound she'd never heard herself make before — the sound echoed from the walls, louder and louder, ricocheting through the cave system as she shrieked Duncan's name, desperate to let him know where she was, to come and get her...

Ironjaw swore under his breath, his ugly face twisting with cruelty, and he leapt upon her, his wiry little frame wrapping tight around her as he sat on her chest and put both hands over her mouth to silence her. Hands bound and body weakened from days of starvation, she couldn't put up much of a fight... but she wasn't going to let that stop her. Adrenaline took over where the flesh was weak, and she thrashed like a woman possessed, screaming bloody murder through the press of Ironjaw's angry little hands. In that moment, she'd never felt such black rage in all her days — if she'd been able to get her hands out of the ropes that bound them, she felt like she might tear the goblin limb from limb.

But he was stronger than her, heavier than her, and he had her at a disadvantage — she felt her strength ebbing and sobbed, thrashing all the harder as her desperation took over. Ironjaw was cackling as he pressed his hands down harder, and she realized with a shock that she couldn't breathe properly, that she was only catching shallow breaths through her nose with Ironjaw's hands sealing her mouth shut. It was so dark in the cave, so shadowy... the shadows almost seemed to be moving... behind Ironjaw... her eyes widened in surprise, her rational mind not quite sure what she was seeing. It was almost as though the shadows were coalescing into a vaguely humanoid form... a small human, barely a few feet tall. The size of a child... with one arm a little smaller than the other....

Her shock must have shown on her face. Ironjaw's eyes narrowed and he turned to look over his shoulder — and then, quick enough to make her gasp, a blade flashed out of nowhere, and a gleaming silver knife was suddenly sticking out of Ironjaw's back. He screamed bloody murder, twisting, and thrashing to try to grab the blade from his back — and then the shadow evaporated, leaving none other than Darter Hob standing there, his eyes wild with wild rage and triumph. There was a second knife in his hands, and he dove to Helena's aid as Ironjaw stumbled away, yelling in pain as he tried unsuccessfully to reach the knife that was sticking out of his back.

"Darter! How — "

"I'm only a young glashtyn, but I still know a few of our tricks," he told her brightly, and she'd never seen such confidence glowing on his little face before. "Quick! Duncan's out the front waiting." With that, he sawed through the ropes binding her hands, and she sighed in relief as she was finally freed, massaging her severely chafed wrists. She could barely believe what was happening, that Darter was actually here — it felt like her mind was still trapped in the past, disbelieving the evidence of her eyes. Was she dreaming?

No — not judging by the volume of the unearthly shriek that Ironjaw uttered when he saw her wrists unbound. She rocketed to her feet, nearly hitting her head on the roof of the cave, then stooped low, feeling Darter's good hand slip through hers and tug her forward, toward the opening that she'd spent so much time staring at. Ironjaw was still trying to grab the knife out of his own back, howling as thick, black blood ran down his body — she took a

breath, shocked by how much power the little goblin had delivered the blow with.

They ran through the cave system, hand in hand, Helena's heart pounding and stars flying before her eyes as her dizziness threatened to take her over. She couldn't pass out, not now — not with freedom so close, not with Darter running ahead of her, casting worried glances back over his shoulder at her as he led her through the caves. Cave after cave, twisting and dark — but Darter seemed supernaturally composed, as though he'd walked this path a thousand times, and she realized with a sudden shock that he must be able to see in the dark. Trusting him to lead her, she quickened her pace, forcing herself to calm down as she heard the tell-tale sounds of the goblin behind them, chasing them down.

The caves were getting lighter and lighter, and she realized with a shock that she could see daylight pouring into this one — they were so close to the outside. Fear gripped her as she realized that she could hear the distant sound of blows, and an angry voice raised — Darter pulled hard on her hand and she summoned the last of her strength for a last burst of speed and they broke out through the mouth of the cave, the light almost too much for her sensitive eyes to bear... after all, she'd been stuck in a cave for ... how long? Days? A week? It was impossible to say, impossible to figure it out — all she knew was that she was free, now, and the afternoon air had never tasted so sweet.

But her joy was short lived. Darter uttered a high, keening shriek of fear as footsteps sounded behind them, and she stumbled away down the beach toward the shores of the Loch as Ironjaw came stumbling out of the cave behind them. The caves, it turned out, were set in an embankment close to the shore of the Loch — they must have been quite some distance from the Keep, too, because she couldn't see any sign of the Keep when she looked along the coast.

But what she could see was Duncan, leaping down from the embankment. She felt herself nearly collapse with relief at the sight of him, alive and well — he had a sword in his hand and a wild look on his face, and he looked so much the conquering hero that it took her breath away, just for a moment. His eyes alighted on her and the expression of relief that crossed his face matched her own — she beamed, feeling tears spilling down her cheeks as he rushed across the sand toward her —

"Duncan!" That was Darter, a high scream ripping itself free from his throat — and Duncan spun just in time to deflect a savage blow from Ironjaw, who had taken the distraction as an opportunity to creep up on Duncan. His face was twisted with rage, blood all over his hands from his unsuccessful attempts to remove the blade, and he roared with twisted fury at Duncan, barely making any sense — spitting his brother's name, spitting unrepeatable curses and insults to the Clan, to Helena, to humankind in general.

Duncan stood for a moment, a look of pity and revulsion on his face — but then Ironjaw slashed at him again with the sword in his hand. He danced back, surprisingly nimble for such a large man — then closed the gap and drove his own sword straight through the goblin's chest. With one final, ugly scream, Ironjaw collapsed, blood guttering from the great wound in his body. She watched in horror as the wound sizzled and burned, realizing belatedly that the blade must have been iron... and as she watched, horrified, and fascinated, Ironjaw's body began to disintegrate. Before long, not much remained but his bow and the tattered pouch he'd carried with him everywhere.

"You found me," she said faintly into the eerie silence that followed, her voice unrecognizable. "You saved me." She must have looked a mess, she realized belatedly — her hands and face were covered in grit and grime from the floor of the cave, and her dress was torn and tattered. But Duncan didn't seem to care. He pulled her into his arms and pressed the most passionate, bruising kiss she'd ever experienced to her lips, and she melted against him, feeling so utterly relieved that she thought she might pass out.

"Um," Darter interjected, his voice anxious as he tugged at the hem of her tattered skirt. "Sorry. But —"

He pointed wordlessly — and Helena bit her lip. There, standing on top of the embankment, was a slightly confused looking Grunt. His eyes were on the remnants of his leader, and he looked utterly confused as he prodded at the pouch, as though searching for his friend. Not friend, she thought with a sigh. Master, if anything. Then he turned his beady yellow eyes to Duncan, who put his hand on the hilt of his sword again, taking a step to position himself between Helena and Grunt...

"No," she said quickly, stepping around him and raising her hand. "No — Grunt's not dangerous. Not on his own."

Grunt grunted again, as if responding to his name. Then he

looked at Helena, as if working his way through something very serious. "Secret," he said solemnly.

"That's right," she said, feeling tears spring to her eyes. "Duncan, he saved my life. He's — he's not intelligent, and I think he does what he's told, more or less. He's not evil. Not like Ironjaw. Is there any way we can —"

"Helena, do you have any idea what you're asking me? These goblins held you prisoner for six days straight," Duncan said, his voice shaking with feeling. "I thought — I had begun to think that —" His voice cracked. "I won't let him live."

"Ironjaw didn't care if I lived or died," she said sharply. She could see a figure shambling up the beach toward them and realized with shock that it was old Maggie. She, too, had joined the rescue mission? There was something very touching about that... but right now, she was on a strange rescue mission of her own. "But Grunt brought me water when Ironjaw was going to let me die of thirst. If it wasn't for him, I'd be dead. There's kindness in him. Violence, too — but only because he's hungry."

"Hungry," Grunt echoed solemnly.

She let a laugh escape her. "He's good at food-related words."

"Well, well, well." Old Maggie had reached them — and she was giving Grunt a beady-eyed stare. "What do we have here, then?"

Grunt grunted again, as if in answer.

Maggie snorted. "He had a bit of muscle with him, then. This creature is barely Unseelie," she added, glancing over her shoulder at Duncan with a dismissive shrug. "You need intelligence to be one way or the other. You might as well punish a horse for the crimes of its rider."

"What do we do with him?" Duncan said, frowning. "We can't just — leave him here."

Maggie waved him away. She took a few steps closer to the goblin, who loomed over her, looking down at her with a bland curiosity. And then she spoke in a language that Helena didn't recognize — a beautiful, lilting language that almost seemed to summon the wind and to cool the air on her skin. It was exquisite, and strange, and ethereal... and for some reason, it reminded her of the glowing figures who'd healed her in the aftermath of her car crash.

Grunt listened too, more intently than she'd thought he was capable of. He looked at Maggie for a long moment, then nodded,

and without any preamble, walked directly toward the edge of the Loch. Helena thought he was just going to rinse the blood from his hands, but instead he simply walked straight into the Loch and kept going until the water had claimed him completely. Maggie watched, shaking her head.

"Did he just — drown himself?" Duncan said blankly.

"A brute like that can do without air for a few hours," Maggie said with a grin. "I sent him home. Someone on the Seelie court will have use for his muscle, I'm sure."

"Thank you so much," Helena said softly, looking around at her three rescuers. "You — you found me. You rescued me. I was starting to give up hope." Darter was beaming proudly, his chest stuck out and his eyes dancing. "And Darter! How's that for facing your fears? Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes," he said brightly, bouncing from foot to foot. "I'm all better now. Never going to get scared again." He puffed his chest out, grinning. "Now I know that we can take on any Unseelie monsters who come through the Burgh."

"Call it even," Maggie said with a shrug. "You helped us, we helped you... even though it was a damn fool thing to do, getting yourself kidnapped." She raised an eyebrow. "Imagine you'll be wanting a bath."

Helena hesitated. It was true — she'd kill for a clean change of clothes and some warm water to cleanse her body — but what she really wanted was to go back to the Keep and spend about a week in bed with Duncan... but Maggie's eyes were glittering with amusement.

"I'll not have you tracking sand through my house," she said archly. "You're the Keep's problem until you scrub up a little."

Helena laughed, feeling utterly dizzy and overwhelmed... and deeply, profoundly grateful for her friends, for their daring rescue, and for the defeat of the goblins, once and for all. She looked up at Duncan, who beamed down at her, putting a protective arm around her shoulders as he spoke.

"Come on then, lass. Let's get you home."

Chapter 30

With the goblins defeated and banished, the weeks flew by in what felt like a blur. There was a flurry of activity when they arrived back at the castle — Helena felt a little overwhelmed by how many people came rushing up to them, clearly very invested in whether or not she was okay. It was a little like that first night, and she found herself getting overwhelmed until Duncan waved everyone away, insisting that she needed her space and that the two of them would be down to tell the story over dinner. But instead, they stayed in his quarters. He called for water for a bath and a hearty meal to be sent up, and she scrubbed every scrap of sand and salt from her skin while stuffing pieces of cheese into her mouth and devouring them as quickly as she could. It was just about the most delicious meal she'd ever had.

And then... well, then they had a little bit of catching up to do, picking right up where they'd left off that day by the lake.

The next day, they filled the castle in on what had happened, informing the Laird and his advisors of the whole story. They were a little worried by the news that one of the goblins had 'escaped', but when Duncan explained that it had been Maggie who'd seen fit to send him home instead of executing him, the Laird and his men agreed that it had been the right decision. And Helena was glad to know that she'd been able to repay the creature's kindness, as slow as he may have been. The truth was that if it hadn't been for him, she'd have died of thirst in that cave. In a way, she owed him every happiness that followed... in just the same way that she owed the Sidhe for every happiness she experienced here, in this strange new world that was growing so comfortable.

It was three weeks to the day since Duncan, Darter, and Maggie had rescued her from the goblins that she and Duncan went riding down to visit Maggie at her cottage again. It was a warm summer's day, surprisingly humid, with the warm sun beating down on both of them as they rode down the now intimately familiar road toward Maggie's cottage. They'd seen her since the rescue, of course, but only fleetingly — and today, they planned to stay for a good while.

They had the largest batch of shortbread that Helena had ever seen, bundled up and ready to deliver to Maggie — Duncan had joked that they'd brought so much that Maggie might even think to share it with them.

She slid off her horse once they reached the cottage, impatient to see her friends. To think, she'd once felt nervous, walking up to this cottage door — now, all she felt was excited to see Maggie and Darter, and hopefully Kaitlyn, who had been spending more and more time with Maggie now that the fear of goblin attacks was a thing of the past... *at least for now*, Helena corrected herself. The Burgh was always down there, ominous and frightening, and there was always the chance that something might creep through again and threaten their wellbeing. But for now, just for now... there was peace.

Which made it the perfect time to come to Maggie's. Well, that... and one other piece of news that the two of them were keeping to themselves for the time being.

It was Kaitlyn who greeted them, her bright blue eyes shining as she pulled Helena into a hug and then offered Duncan a stiff handshake. Never one to trust men too much, she was steadily warming to Duncan anyway. They headed into the cottage, where the table had been set for lunch, though Maggie was bustling around in the kitchen, clearly pretending to have forgotten that they were coming. It was amusing, the lengths the old woman would go to just to maintain her image of a tough, brusque, uncaring old witch... especially when both Duncan and Helena knew full well that she was as soft as the butter they were spreading on their bread.

She perked up a great deal when they revealed the enormous bundle of shortbread after lunch, sitting around the fire, talking, and laughing. She was spreading the bundle open on the table when the door clicked behind them, and Darter came slipping in through the door, a little smile on his bright features. Helena grinned as he joined them, swiping a piece of shortbread then dancing away from Maggie's retaliatory swipe. The little goblin had been doing so well since the altercation with Ironjaw. There had been something about physically confronting that manifestation of all his fears that had been really good for him... and he was getting a lot better with his glashtyn powers, too, with the skills of disguise that he'd used to creep up close enough to deliver the fatal distracting blow to

Ironjaw that day. The blow that had saved Helena's life.

"How are you doing, Darter?" she asked, when she saw a slight shadow cross his face at some reference to all the kerfuffle of a few weeks ago. Bright outlook or not, that kind of thing had a way of weighing on a person — she didn't want him to feel like he couldn't share his feelings, positive or negative. Especially with his friends.

"A little sad, sometimes," he admitted, his eyes flicking up and down the table. "I mean, those goblins were Unseelie, they were my enemies... it just... it reminded me that just about every single one of the people like me... will never be my friends. I'm alone."

Kaitlyn narrowed her eyes at him — and before he could react, she pulled him into a tight hug. Helena couldn't help but laugh at the way the goblin laughed and squirmed, for all the world like a younger brother having affection forced upon him by a loving older sister — it was a dynamic she was all too familiar with. "You're never alone, Darter! We're your friends. Even better — we're your family."

He smiled back at her, clearly touched by the sentiment even as he wriggled free of the grip. Maggie nodded. "And I wouldn't give up on the Seelie Court, if I were you," she said with a shrug of her shoulders. "True enough that the majority of goblins are Unseelie, but you changed sides, didn't you? Do you really think you're the only one?"

He hesitated. "Well —"

"Exactly. Damn foolish thing, thinking you're the most unique creature ever to set foot on the Earth." She rolled her eyes, stuffing another piece of shortbread into her mouth... then narrowed her eyes at the table. "What? You'd better jump in quick if you want any of this before I finish it off."

That was just about the most touching invitation they were going to get — chuckling to herself, Helena took a piece of the shortbread, which was still just slightly warm from Blair's ovens back at the Keep. "Speaking of being alone," she said carefully, giving Duncan a glance. "Or, more to the point, not being alone..."

"This isn't just a social visit," Duncan said, his eyes dancing with amusement. Kaitlyn perked up, a look of vivid curiosity on her pretty face, and Darter blinked in curiosity too, his furry ears standing on end as he nibbled on a piece of shortbread. Maggie didn't give any indication she'd heard what Duncan had said, but when the suspenseful silence had gone on for a fraction too long,

she huffed a sigh.

"Well? Get on with it."

"We came to deliver some personal invitations," Helena said with a smile, blushing a little as she looked up at Duncan. "To our wedding — a month from now."

Kaitlyn squealed so loudly that Helena was surprised it didn't shatter half the glass vials in the house, and Darter threw himself on Duncan and then Helena with the most forceful hug a one-armed goblin was capable of giving. Maggie almost immediately dropped into a low chuntering monologue about how she wasn't setting foot in that damned castle until they'd thrown most of the iron straight into the Loch itself — but Helena could see that she was holding back a smile, and that her bright blue eyes had gone just a little misty at the announcement.

She sat back in the squashed old couch, leaning against Duncan's side, and smiling up at him. He was the love of her life — she'd never been more certain of anything in all her days. This place was strange, and frightening, and the things she'd been through would be with her for a very long time... but at the same time, she knew that if the Sidhe offered her the choice between going back to her old life and staying here with everything she'd discovered, everything she and Duncan had built together... she wouldn't need more than a heartbeat to decide.

This was where she belonged, with her dear friends around her, and the love of her life by her side.



* * *

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Preview of Highlander Found

Chapter 1

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At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow. It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child. Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday. Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R. day after day, night after night. They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags. Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center. But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings. Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures. Look at the pictures," Audrina chanted to herself. She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before she drifted off to sleep. Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland. That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States. Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall trees were the ancient forests of Scotland. She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash. But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven. After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors. The

timing had just never felt right. There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was something holding her back. Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her about the ancient folklore. Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels. She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, *"Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."*

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum," she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized. There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really. *"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic. Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, 'Finally, you are taking a vacation,' when I tell them,"* Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little Donald. She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind. It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital. The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs. Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly different, but as equally as devastating. That's when Grandfather had taken her in. She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him. She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night. He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else. Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back. When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one. She hadn't even bothered getting a pet. Audrina was never home because she worked so much. She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side. She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity. Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it. She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been

able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures. Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed. He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her. A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture. But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes. Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.



* * *

Candles surrounded her in a circle, haloing the circular room with an ethereal glow. Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower. She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.

There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood. The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and frayed at the edges. A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed. It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch. The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor. She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen. The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.

There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her. Begging her to release them of their captivity. She couldn't help them that night. They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning. Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast. The candles

flickered, and she feared they would blow out. Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.

Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending dampness. It rained often in Scotland. She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room. The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows. She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.

She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin. It glowed in the candlelight like fire. She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured. The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back. How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch? There was no fire there. The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there. The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul. There was no possible way the stone could be warm.

Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest. Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin. And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above."

The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning's sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window. She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall. She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless. She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place. She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps. She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as..."



* * *

Audrina woke, sitting bolt upright in bed.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures. “*What the heck was that?*” she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows. She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position. She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose to nose with the picture of the castle. Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower. It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly. So brightly it almost lit up the room.

And then...and then, that dream. What a strange dream. Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her? She must have died there. Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in. She had to save her. *But how? That’s silly. The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell. And what kind of a spell was that anyway?* Audrina’s mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind. She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind’s vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day’s strenuous shift was washed away. She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror. She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind. The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room. *Did she have brown eyes like my own?* Audrina wondered. She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap. The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco’s Museum of Natural History. Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from

Scotland. She figured she could kill two birds with one stone. She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered. She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.

Chapter 2

When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits. She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth. She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out. She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet. As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream. The one that the woman, that she, had cursed. Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it. But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure. Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked similar. But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

"The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle's eastern most tower. Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower, where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure. Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people. It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners. Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English. It is known that Lord Cotswold's reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape. He often invoked the

First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides. It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death. It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlayed kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and ruler.”

Audrina’s hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch. “*How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,*” she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, “Are you going to stand there all day?”

She jumped and shouted, “Sorry!” over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans. She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d’art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it. She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own ancestors. Just when her patience couldn’t possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by. She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill. The silver

had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun. From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples. But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins. On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river. Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland. The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare." So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them. The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came. The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow. She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it. She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland. It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts. She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside. When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail. Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to

stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor. Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something. A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as “her” kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum’s security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear. As athletic as she was, it didn’t take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr. Tanaka at his Japanese dojo. Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved. And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr. Tanaka’s ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina’s capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the sunny courtyard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?” one of the officer called. “You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!” he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.

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About Rebecca Preston

Rebecca lives in New York City with her dog. She loves sweet love stories with great characters. She loves traveling the world and experiencing new cities and cultures. Jane Austen is her favorite author.

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